

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S **Mystery** MAGAZINE

JANUARY 1999

## **DEATH IN THE DALES**

**Murder Comes to  
a Yorkshire Manor**

**BY C.M. CHAN**

**B.K. Stevens —**  
**A Hanukkah Whodunit**

**Frank Sullivan —**  
**A Christmas Mystery**

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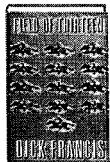
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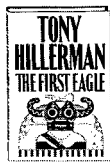
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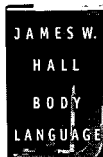
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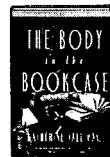
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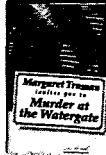
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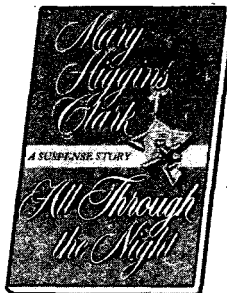
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**ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE**, Vol. 44, No. 1, January, 1999. Published monthly except for a July/August double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$33.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625. Or, to subscribe, call 1-800-333-3311, ext. 4000. Editorial and Executive Offices, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. Periodical postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 1998 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express written permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. GST #R123054108.

USPS:523-590 ISSN:0002-5224.

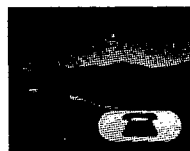
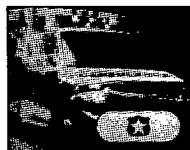
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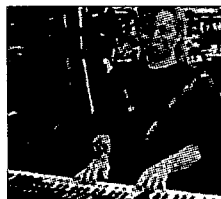
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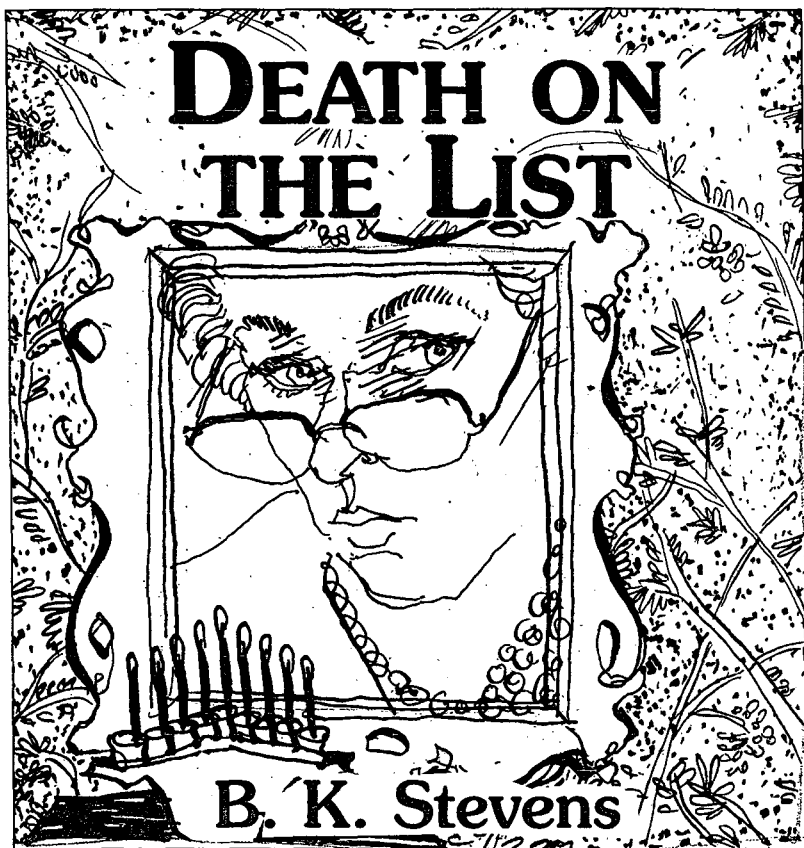
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**T**his is nuts," he said. "You're probably sicker than the secretary you're replacing. You won't last one day."

"I can last a whole week or more if I have to," she said. A cough started, but she caught it, forced it down, killed it. "It's just a cold. And what an opportunity this is! To get an inside look at the Theo Clay Seven C's Institute!"

He screwed the top on her thermos bottle. "You used to say Clay was a charlatan, Leah."

"I never called him a charlatan," she said, though she was pretty sure she'd come close. "His theories are basically sound. He just puts them into language everyone can understand. And this fits in so perfectly with the focus of my new book."

"But it's Sunday," he protested. "Who works on Sunday?"

"Lots of people. You, for one—you'll be sculpting all day. And the institute isn't always open on Sunday. The temp agency said some big seminar's starting to-



morrow, and there are lots of preparations to make. So people are desperate for help."

Defeated, he handed her the thermos. "My special chicken soup. Maybe it'll help. And you'll definitely be home by sundown? The girls will be crushed if you're not."

"Oh, Sam! Would I miss the first night of Hanukkah? I'll be home in time to make latkes."

"I'll make the latkes," he said. "You're too sick to cook."

"Not really, but thanks." She stood on tiptoe to kiss him—lightly, on the forehead, for fear of spreading germs. "Now, I've got my lunch, I've got my keys—my notebook! Where's my notebook? This is one day when I *know* I'll want to take notes!"

### *Sunday, December 13*

It's lunchtime—my first chance to take notes. The Seven C's Institute is housed in the Winchester Mansion, in the old residential part of downtown. Walking down its broad hallways past cosy conference rooms and state-of-the-art offices, I found myself thinking of the often-told Theo Clay story—how Olympia Winchester hired him to manage the failing shoe business she'd inherited from her husband; how he turned the business into a success, and her into a multimillionaire, by applying his Seven C's of Creative Control; how he handed the shoe company over to her nephew and founded the institute; how Mrs. Winchester, with her newly unlimited wealth, left to live her childhood dream of

never-ending world travel; how thousands of people now flock to Seven C's Seminars every year to learn how to duplicate the total success Theo Clay exemplifies. As I knocked on the door to the Logistical Support Office and gazed at the famous logo of seven linked C's, I was no longer thinking of Theo Clay as a mere popularizer. I was thinking he might be onto something.

The door was opened by Helen Rhodes—just forty or so, probably attractive or even beautiful once but already worried skinny and cross. "Leah Abrams?" she said. "Thank God. Of all the days for Cori to decide she's sick! She's never taken a sick day before—she's always *seemed* to have such high Commitment values, such devotion to Theo—and then *this* happens!"

I sat at Corinne Turner's desk, impressed by the energy it reflected—polished nameplate, empty in tray, bulging out tray, Things to Do list with almost every item crossed off, Seven C's Motivation-a-Day calendar open to yesterday's date. "It looks as if you and Cori had to work on Saturday, too," I observed.

"Of course we did," she said, irritated. "It's our busiest time. Cori looked perfectly fine all day."

"Well, colds can come on suddenly," I said soothingly. "She called in sick this morning?"

"She *e-mailed* in sick—at ten fifteen last night. How could she be sure then she'd be too sick to work? She's a lazy bi—no." She cut the word off, clenching her

fists and mumbling "control, control" to herself. Then she took a breath and smiled.

"Time for your Greeting," she said brightly.

She walked about a bit as she spoke, carefully varying her tone and gesturing regularly. "Call me Helen," she said. "We all use first names here. This is a special place, a place where we all live the Seven C's every day. It's a Community where we nurture Caring relationships. It's a place of Commitment—to our work, to each other. It's a place that encourages Creativity and fosters the Courage to take on challenges, a place to strive for Clarity within ourselves and with others. It's a place, finally, where we achieve Control—of our bodies and minds and spirits, our work and dreams, our personal and professional relationships. Welcome, Leah, to the Theo Clay Seven C's Institute."

"Thank you," I said. It had so obviously been a performance, so obviously a difficult one—this didn't come naturally to her.

She wiped her brow. "Well. The Seven C's Trainers' Seminar starts tomorrow. A full seven days long, sixty-three motivators flying in from all over the country for daily sessions with Theo himself—and my office makes all the arrangements. We've got nametags to make, folders to assemble—a thousand things to do."

The first of those things, Helen said, was confirming hotel reservations. The clerks at the four hotels I called all said the same

thing: Yes, the reservations were fine, they'd been confirmed last night—how often did we people need to check on these things, anyway? I thought Helen would be pleased.

She wasn't. "Cori must've confirmed them after I left yesterday. Why didn't she tell me, so we wouldn't waste time today? Well, call the caterer. We have some menu changes."

But the caterer, too, had been called last night. It was then that on a hunch I looked at Cori's Things to Do list, at the items penciled in precisely and crossed out in triumphantly red Magic Marker. So that's it, I thought.

I took the list to Helen's office. "It looks as if Cori did several things after you left yesterday," I said. "See? 'Confirm reservations,' 'call caterers,' 'check on BC in S for DW,' 'make nametags,' 'assemble folders'—all crossed off. And then 'set up Blue Room'—not crossed off. I guess she didn't get to that."

An "f" sound escaped Helen's lips, but she caught it. "Oh dear," she said. "Cori must've forgotten I always assemble those folders and set up the Blue Room personally. My my."

Note: Helen seems to be a Negatively Impactful Hierarchical Inhibitor. Cori had performed admirably: seeing that Helen was overstressed, she'd stayed late and taken on extra chores. She deserved Initiative-Assumption Commendation, not Turf-Infringement Condemnation. Case study for Chapter Six.

We found the nametags in Cori's out tray but couldn't find the folders she'd apparently assembled last night. Helen planted her hands on her hips, just barely not fuming. "Maybe she took them to the Blue Room," she said, "and then decided she was too sick to finish setting up. Gracious. If I can't find those folders, I'll be in deep—disappointment."

"What's in them?" I followed her down the hall.

"Oh, Assessment Guidelines, Reflection Registers—that sort of thing," she said. "Trainers in the Blue Room watch through a two-way mirror as colleagues in the Little Theater rehearse Motivational Modules. The observers record—here we are."

She opened a door to a blue-walled conference room. An untidily dumped stack of folders sat on the long oak conference table; at least twenty pencils were scattered on the floor. Helen gasped at the mess, but I hardly noticed it. My eyes were fixed on the two-way mirror, at the two figures visible on the other side. Goodness, I thought. That must be Annie Clay herself.

I recognized her from glimpses I'd caught while flipping past late-night infomercials—a trim, flawlessly groomed woman in her fifties. She held a video camera pointed at a young man with wavy blond hair, a chin squared with geometric precision, and muscles that threatened to ripple through his sea-blue blazer.

"One more time, Vic," she was saying. "More warmth, more sin-

cerity—Friends, here's Theo Clay! Put your heart into it!"

"Goodness!" I said, and Annie Clay shot a glance at the mirror.

"Who's there?" she demanded. "We're taping here."

Helen glared at me before stepping up to a microphone near the mirror. "It's Helen and a temp," she said. "I'm sorry, Annie. Somebody must've left the two-way audio on."

Annie Clay set down the camera. "A temp? Has she met Theo?"

"Well, no," Helen said. "After all, Leah may be here for just a day or two. I didn't want to waste Theo's time by—"

"Meeting an employee is never a waste of time," Annie said, smiling at the two-way mirror. "Leah's part of our Community now, even if not for long. Welcome, Leah. I'll take you to Theo."

Note: Fine job of making even a temp feel valued. Also impressive—warmth with which Annie squeezed the young man's hand as she left. I knew him from infomercial glimpses, too: for the last year he's introduced Theo Clay; he's a minor player, but Annie took time to acknowledge him. A truly Positively Impactful Hierarchical Facilitator; perfect example for Chapter Three.

When she met us in the hall, more details from the Theo Clay story came back to me—Annie Tokus had been his secretary, applying his Seven C's theories with such insight that she'd become invaluable to him and eventually had become his bride. Now she led me through the reception

area, paused to give me a wise smile, and rapped crisply on the door to his private office. There he was—sitting in a chintz-covered armchair, talking to a slight, sweaty, fortyish man slumped on a matching sofa. When Theo Clay looked up, I could feel that mesmerizing charm and vigor immediately.

He stood and grasped my hand. "Don't tell me," he said. "Leah Abrams. I saw the resume your agency faxed us. An M.A. in communications! Communication is so much a part of Clarity—of Community—of all the Seven C's. Now, why is someone with your credentials doing temp work? Is it a Choice you embrace or a Challenge to overcome?"

"A choice," I said, feeling guilty. He was so warm, so direct—what would he say if he knew that I in fact have a Ph.D., that I'm doing temporary work so I can observe workplace communications and gather data for my new book? "It allows me more time with my children. And since my husband's an artist—"

"An artist!" he cut in. "He must resonate with Creativity! Is he the Samuel Abrams who sculpted those marvelous redwood flamingos for the Rutherfords? What's he working on now?"

"An alabaster snowman," I said, chafing for poor Sam's sake. He hates it that he can't sell his serious work, that he has to make a living carving custom-made lawn ornaments. "It's for Fiona Sanderson. She's been cast in a new sitcom, and she thinks she'll miss

the snow when she moves to Hollywood."

He nodded. "Well, Leah, you must call me Theo. And this is Del Winchester, the nephew of our beloved Mother Winchester."

The slight, sweaty man slid a moist palm against my hand but never looked at me. "Hello. Theo, you *will* talk to Mother? Say I'm grateful for her letters, but I need some definite word about the pearls. She always said she'd give me the Winchester pearls when I got married, and I've been married for three months now. I've promised the pearls to Tessa, and she can't help wondering—"

"Of course." Theo guided him to the door. "Now, take good care of our dear shoe company. I have such fond memories of it."

"No wonder *you* have fond memories of it," Del said, looking up at him wistfully. "You made it such a success. I'm barely keeping it in the black. I try, Theo—I truly do. I follow the Seven C's as faithfully as I can. But I don't have your knack—"

"It's not a matter of having a knack. You need Courage. Believe in yourself, and everything else will follow."

The two men walked on, and I was left to gaze at a huge oil painting above the sofa—a portrait of Olympia Winchester, the woman everyone here apparently calls Mother, the one who gave Theo his start at her shoe business. The portrait must have been painted years ago, for she looked barely sixty—a tall, serene woman wearing a deep blue velvet



gown, magnificent sapphire earrings, and a triple strand of perfect pearls with an exquisite sapphire clasp. Those must be the pearls Del wanted to give his bride. No wonder Mother was reluctant to part with them.

Theo returned, sat me down on the sofa, and talked for a solid ten minutes about the Seven C's, his pale blue eyes intense with fervor. Then Helen came, voice apologetic and eyes adoring, saying we really did have a million things to do.

Theo sighed. "All right," he said. "I should let you get to work. But later, Leah, I want to hear all about your master's thesis."

I'll tone the dissertation down at bit. Meanwhile, it was back to Helen's office, back to those million things to do. Finally, she's given me a break, and I'm hurrying through my sandwich as I make these notes. Looking at Cori's desk again—it seems sad Helen hasn't called to check on her. The institute emphasizes Caring, yet Helen shows no concern for a dedicated employee who wouldn't stay home unless she were truly ill. For Cori clearly *is* dedicated. Her desk proves it—not just the framed photographs of the Clays and the careful Things to Do list, but the copy of Theo's latest book. Flipping open *Sailing the Seven C's to Creative Control*, I can see Cori's been studying it carefully, making notes in the margins. It looks as if she'd just finished Chapter Eight and was about to begin—

Rats. Helen's back. I'll have to

break my notes off. And I haven't even tasted Sam's soup. Well, Cori's sick, too—she could use some chicken soup. And I'm sure she'll be glad to have her book. Her address is on the bookplate—her apartment's on my way home. I can drop off the book and the thermos, still get home by sunset, and—all right, Helen. I hear you. I'm coming.

Even before she rang the doorbell to Cori's second-floor apartment, Leah felt something was wrong. There was the smell—the faint, spicy smell of burned tomatoes—and the tired buzzing sound, and something more. It's doom, Leah thought. I don't know why this feels like doom, but I know it does. She found the building superintendent and persuaded him to unlock the door.

It was doom, all right. The living room looked tidy, except for the bottle of scotch and the single glass on the coffee table; Leah didn't notice, at first, the fragments of glass near the french doors leading to the balcony. But something dreadful waited in the bedroom—Cori Turner, wearing a long pink flannel nightgown, sprawled facedown on the floor. Leah crouched down, pressed against her wrist and neck, felt nothing but a terrible coldness.

"Call 911," she said numbly. "Call the police."

She was glad when Detective Brock arrived just a few minutes after the uniformed officers. He was a fine detective, a fair man—and, she hoped, too sensitive to

joke about the way she kept stumbling across bodies when she took temporary jobs.

At least he kept it short. He arched an eyebrow when he spotted her, nodded as she told her story, then merely commented that perhaps the temp agency should put a warning label on her resume. That wasn't bad—any cop in this situation would say that much. For the next half hour, she sat on the couch with the building superintendent watching silently as officers and technicians went through the brisk, dreary business of inspecting a murder scene. For that's what this was—she overheard enough bits of talk to know that much. Finally, Detective Brock joined them again, asked questions, and sent the superintendent home. "You can leave, too, Mrs. Abrams," he said. "You still working on that book about duads and networks and stuff?"

"No," she said, hardly able to focus on his question. "That book is finished. I haven't found a publisher yet; my theories may be too esoteric for the market. I'm working on a new book now—*A Hermeneutics of Workplace Communications: Positively and Negatively Impactful Hierarchical Facilitation.*"

"Wow," he said, impressed. "You always were one for the titles. Well, thanks for your help. If I need more, I'll call."

"Was it a burglar?" she asked.

He nodded. "Looks that way. Based on what you told me, she worked late last night, came home

feeling lousy, had a drink, felt worse, sent that e-mail message at ten fifteen saying she'd be too sick to work in the morning, went to bed. The burglar probably saw all the lights off, figured no one was home. He broke some glass in the french doors, got in, put a few valuables in a grocery bag we found on the balcony—and, unfortunately, made enough noise to wake her up. When she confronted him, he chased her into the bedroom and hit her with some heavy object. Then he ran, leaving the bag—no sense keeping evidence that could tie him to a murder when the stuff wasn't worth much anyway."

It didn't sound right.

"I smelled something when I first got here," she said. "Something burning—tomatoes, I think."

"Lasagna." He nodded again. "Leftovers. We found it in the oven. She must've started to re-heat it, decided she was too sick to eat, and forgotten to turn the oven off."

"Her desk at work is so neat," Leah said, frowning. "She seems so organized—would she be that careless? And wouldn't the buzzer have awakened her? I thought I heard an oven buzzer when I arrived. Or did the burglar come and go before it went off?"

He pursed his lips. "Let's see—she'd have set the timer for thirty minutes or so. She goes to bed, falls asleep, wakes up, gets killed—it's sorta tight. I'll give it some thought. You better get home to your family. They're probably waiting dinner."

"Good heavens," she said, remembering. "They're not just waiting dinner. They're waiting Hanukkah."

She gave Sam a whispered account of what happened but didn't tell the girls—it'd be cruel to ruin their holiday with such a story. During dinner she tried to chat normally, to block out the image of the body on the bedroom floor. It wasn't easy.

Sam tried to distract her with latkes. "Here they are," he said, setting down the platter. "My first latkes ever. Dig in."

After one bite she put down her fork. "Sam, these are mashed potato patties. Latkes are made with *grated* potatoes. All these years I've made latkes for you, and you never noticed?"

"I'll do better tomorrow night," he promised, blushing as he took the plates away. "Well. Let's light the candles."

She smiled as Sarah and Rachel put two candles in the nine-branched menorah—one in the center as a helper to light the others, one on the far right for the first night of Hanukkah. She stayed smiling as Sam said the first two blessings, thanking God for the commandment to light the Hanukkah candles and for performing wondrous deeds for their ancestors. But at the third blessing, at the thanks offered "for sustaining us, keeping us in life, and enabling us to reach this season," she broke into sobs.

"Oh, Sam," she cried, huddling against him gratefully as the children rushed over to see what

was wrong. "Poor Cori. Why couldn't *she* reach this season, Sam? It isn't right."

### *Monday, December 14*

Lunch hour again, and another chance to take notes. My cold is worse—I hardly slept last night. It's been a sad morning. There are more secretaries around today, and I've had moments to chat with a few of them. Cori was only twenty-three, I've learned, and had been at the institute two years. She was a real go-getter, everyone agreed—a true believer in the Seven C's, always ready to take on extra work and do favors for anybody. No, she didn't have family in town or a steady boyfriend. Cori didn't have much time to date—she was too focused on success.

At the seminar's opening session, held in a hotel ballroom, I helped Helen pass out nametags. Above the raised platform hung a portrait of a seventy-year-old Mother Winchester (wearing a black silk dress this time, and of course the Winchester pearls). A four-piece band produced a fanfare, and the young man named Vic, biceps throbbing, delivered a passionate introduction praising the man who had turned his life around, who held the secrets to the Seven C's, who could show us the one true way—Theo Clay! Another fanfare, then a short procession—sweaty little Del Winchester, a radiant Annie Clay, a resplendent Theo.

I don't remember just what Theo said—I was too enthralled

by the man to focus on the message. That majestic voice—those almost feverishly intense blue eyes—the lordly way he strode across the stage! All of us—trainers and staffers alike—shouted ourselves hoarse with adoration. Then he stopped, cast his eyes downward, and spoke eloquently of Cori. Even trainers who had never met her got misty. And poor little Del—a sagging moan broke from him, and he wept. This really is a Caring place.

Next Theo called his wife to the stage. Annie had to leave for a few days, he said, to visit a sick sister in Wichita. When she came back, she'd hope to see trainers who had reached new levels of insight and enthusiasm—would we disappoint her? Roars of "no" answered him, he embraced her, and the session ended.

But then I saw something. It's probably not relevant to my thesis, I hope it's insignificant—but I saw something. A few minutes later, as I was fetching *Trainers' Manuals* from Helen's van, I saw Annie and the Adonislike Vic standing by her BMW, hugging. That needn't mean anything—people hug lots here—but his hand strayed down to a region that should, strictly speaking, be reserved for her husband. If she didn't like it, she didn't show it. She kissed him square on the lips, then got in her car. Disturbing. Theo teaches that the Seven C's lead to total Control of personal and professional relationships. Could his own most intimate, important relationship be

so badly out of Control? It hardly seems likely. I must be mistaken.

Tonight Leah managed three bites of latke. "Sam dearest," she said gently, putting down her fork, "how did you grate the potatoes? Food processor?"

He looked up innocently. "Sure. Anything wrong with that?"

"Not if you're cooking for a B'nai B'rith dinner," she said. "Not if you have to produce hundreds of latkes per hour. In that case mushiness is inevitable and forgivable. For your family you grate by hand. It's the only way to get the texture right."

He vowed to do better tomorrow, and they lit the candles, put the girls to bed, and went up to his studio. The alabaster snowman stood before them, roly-poly and glistening.

"It's darling!" Leah cried, glad for a chance to praise something he'd made. "Fiona Sanderson will love it!"

"No, she won't," Sam said glumly. "She came by today, and she said it's all wrong. She says I have to slim it down."

"Nonsense. Whoever heard of a slim snowman?"

"It's what she wants," he said, picking up a chisel in resignation. "She says she'd be ashamed to take a fat snowman to Hollywood with her—she wants svelte."

"Svelte, shmelte," Leah began, but the doorbell rang.

Detective Brock stood on their porch. "I'm sorry to disturb you at home, Mrs. Abrams," he said. "But you were so helpful to me on



that murder at Budget Psychics, and I was wondering if—”

“Of course,” she said, ushering him in. “May I heat up some latkes for you? You can have all you want.”

“No, thanks,” he said, lowering himself onto their couch. “I just ate. I’m full. Cori Turner, now—coroner says her stomach was empty. Not a bite since lunch, he says, just lots of scotch. That fits with working late, putting lasagna in the oven but not eating. But scotch on an empty stomach—that’s odd, especially for someone who’s sick. Unless she was a heavy drinker. Can you find out? Here’s something else. She e-mails in, says she has a bad cold—but the coroner can’t find any sign of it. And she had lots of cold remedies in her medicine chest, but there’s no trace of any in her system. Weird, huh?”

“Very.” It was no burglary, she thought, and Brock knows it.

Brock gazed at the three sputtering candles. “Another thing. I went by that Seven C’s place. Folks there all said she was a dress-for-success type—not lots of clothes, but everything she had was picked just right, kept just so. And they said she wore a blue wool dress to work Saturday. We found the dress—in her laundry hamper. Thing is, it has a ‘Dry Clean Only’ label.”

“Someone dressed Cori in the nightgown after she was dead,” Leah said slowly. “That’s why the dress was in the hamper, why the lasagna was burned. She put it in the oven, but before the

buzzer went off, someone killed her, faked the burglary, sent the e-mail message—Cori wasn’t sick, so that was fake, too—and left. Did the killer really come through the french door?”

“Maybe. Or maybe the glass was broken later. Maybe she let her killer in. Maybe it was someone she knew—from work, say.”

Leah’s eyes widened. “Someone from the institute?”

Brock shrugged. “From what I hear, she didn’t have much of a life outside work. If it wasn’t someone from the institute, who was it? At least the killer knew she worked there, probably sent the e-mail so no one would worry and come check on her. He wanted to make it harder for us to nail down the time of death.”

“And *can* you nail it down?”

“Between nine P.M. Saturday and nine A.M. Sunday,” he said, sighing. “With an empty stomach and a cold body, that’s all we know for sure. Best clue we’ve got is the e-mail message. *Somebody* was around at ten fifteen P.M.—murderer or victim or both.”

“So you want me to keep my eyes open at the institute,” Leah said, “and see if I can identify some suspects for you.”

“Yeah, but be careful,” Brock said. “The last person doing your job got killed. Don’t let that happen to you.”

“Not a chance on earth, detective,” she said, already planning the subtle questions she’d ask.

*Tuesday, December 15*

Not much luck being subtle to-

day. I got Helen mad when I mentioned the scotch on Cori's table and asked casually—I *thought* it was casually—if Cori had been a heavy drinker.

"Nonsense," Helen declared, flaring up. "She hardly drank at all. Why, when Annie's secretary got married last month, Cori didn't even want to have champagne at the reception. Vic teased her until she finally took a glass, but after one sip she made a face and set it down. Cori was a fine person, a hard worker."

Note: Is Helen feeling guilty about being critical of Cori for calling in sick? That fits the profile: Negatively Impactful Inhibitors fail to appreciate workers' merits, then feel regret when they lose those workers to Positively Impactful employers—or, in this case, to death. And Helen's definitely taking Cori's death hard. About an hour ago she came into the reception area, teary-eyed, and set a cardboard box on my desk.

"We have to clear out Cori's personal things," she said, her chin trembling, "and send them to her parents in Pittsburgh. I should do it myself, but I just can't."

It was a depressing task—polishing Cori's nameplate for the last time, wrapping her framed photos of Theo and Annie in tissue paper. I paused when I came to her Things to Do list. Would her parents like this, as a memento of her last day? No, I decided—too poignant. I put it in a drawer. Just at that moment sweaty little Del Winchester slunk into the office.

"Are those Cori's things?" he asked, pointing at the box. "Could I have her Motivation-a-Day calendar as a keepsake?"

"You'd better ask Helen," I said doubtfully.

He shook his head. "Helen won't let me have it. She never does me any favors—never does anyone any favors, except Theo. She sure is different from Cori. Can I see the calendar?"

No harm in that, so I handed it to him. He flipped to the page for Cori's last day and sighed. "No notes," he said. "Sometimes, when she took phone calls, she'd jot notes on her calendar. Did you find *any* notes she took that last day? Any that mentioned me or Mother Winchester?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't find anything like that. Were you hoping to find anything in particular?"

"No." His shoulders sagged. "I was just wondering."

He looked so lost and miserable that I decided to try to cheer him up. "Congratulations on your marriage," I said. "Will your wife be coming to the seminar later this week?"

"No, no," he said, shaking his head fiercely. "She'd love to, but she can't make it. She's in Arizona. Traveling. On business. She travels a lot. You want to see her picture?" He opened his wallet and took out half a dozen photos of a tall, striking blonde of twenty-five or so. "This is Tessa on the beach," he said, handing them to me one at a time. "Here's Tessa at her desk. Here's Tessa in the

kitchen. And here we are on our wedding day. We got married in Texas—her parents live there. It was a last-minute wedding, very small, just family. We'd been engaged for months, and one day Tessa suddenly decided—"

"Excuse me!" a sharp voice cut in, and we looked up to see Helen standing nearby, hands on hips. "Leah has work to do, Del."

"Sorry," he said hastily, scooped up his pictures and fled. Helen looked after him, shaking her head.

"That sorry little bas—nuisance," she said. "He was always hanging around Cori, too, asking her for favors and interfering with her work. I half thought he had a crush on her."

"Well, he certainly seems thoroughly taken with his wife now," I said. "What a lovely woman! Is she nice?"

"I've never met her," Helen said. "She lives in Texas—Del met her on his vacation last year. She's supposedly moving here as soon as she gets some business matters settled, but so far she's never even come for a visit. If you ask me, that marriage is on the rocks already—and a good thing, too. What's a knockout like that doing with a wimp like Del? It's *disgusting* when people throw themselves away on people who don't deserve them."

"There's no accounting for love," I said. Tessa is much more attractive than Del, but that's no reason to assume she doesn't care for him. Note: Poor insight into relationships contributes to

Negatively Impactful behavior. Explore in Chapter Nine.

Tonight Sam was the one to find fault with the latkes. "The texture's still wrong," he said. "Your latkes are so light and crisp. These are so heavy, so soggy, so—starchy."

"They're fine," Leah assured him, then hesitated. "You *did* rinse the grated potatoes in cold water, didn't you? And then soak them and squeeze all the water out carefully?"

He sighed. "That's how you get the starch out?"

"It does help," she admitted. "I should have told you."

He took her plate. "Tomorrow night," he said. "For sure."

When Brock came by, he wasn't surprised to hear Cori hadn't been a drinker. "That fits," he said. "Aside from the scotch, there wasn't a drop of booze in her place. And a liquor store owner saw her picture on TV, called to tell us she came by his store about nine fifteen Saturday night, all agitated. She said she needed 'a good, stiff drink' and asked him what she should buy."

"That sure doesn't sound like someone who's in the habit of drinking," Sam agreed. "So she was agitated. About what?"

"Maybe Helen made cutting remarks about her work," Leah suggested. "Helen *does* have an edge to her. So Cori stayed late to prove herself. And when she went home, she was still so upset that she felt she needed a drink to calm herself down."

"Could be," Brock said, nodding. "Still, a nondrinker—if it was just a rough day at work, you'd figure she'd reach for a milkshake, not scotch. I'd guess she was upset about something bigger. You know of any big problems at the institute Saturday?"

"No," Leah said. "Cori was just doing routine chores—I've seen her Things to Do list. But—well, Del Winchester came by today. He seemed to think Cori might have left a note for him, and was disappointed when I said she hadn't. Helen says Del may have had a crush on Cori. Maybe there was some conflict there."

Brock noted it down. "Del Winchester. I'll check him out."

Leah paused. "There's something else. We've said the killer probably sent the e-mail message. But wouldn't Cori have a password set up? Wouldn't one need that to access her e-mail?"

"I thought of that," Brock said. "The killer must've known her password—or forced her to tell him."

"Or maybe," Leah said, "Cori accessed her e-mail herself, before the killer showed up. Have you checked her sent-mail?"

"Damn!" Brock stood up. "That I *didn't* think of. I'll check it out. and I'll let you know tomorrow."

### *Wednesday, December 16*

At least my sinuses are clearing up. But I've developed an awful cough—it rips through me without warning, long and loud. It set off a very unpleasant—and surprising—incident today.

Vic was in the Little Theater with a trainer, role-playing: Vic posing as a stubborn CEO, the trainer urging him to sign his employees up for a Seven C's Success Series. In the Blue Room Theo commented on the performance as eight other trainers took notes. When I went into the Blue Room, carrying a tray laden with their morning snack of apple juice and granola crunchies, I noticed Theo didn't seem as composed as usual—he was stumbling over his words, gesturing too sharply and repeating himself too much. Odd, I thought. He's done thousands of training sessions; why would this one make him nervous?

That's when I coughed. It was a thunderous, rib-wrenching cough and I couldn't make it stop. I just stood there, hunched over and hacking, while trainers looked at me in sympathy. Then Theo exploded.

"Damn it!" he shouted, turning on me. "Will you shut up?"

Either the cough or the shout must have been loud enough to be heard in the Little Theater. Vic looked up. "Problem?" he asked.

Angrily, Theo flipped the audio switch. "No," he said. "Just keep going. Just go back to—just back up the tape—just—oh, what's the point? Forget it. We'll take a break."

He stormed out into the hall, slamming the door behind him. The trainers sitting at the table stared at each other in shock; one woman, trembling, rocked in her chair and hugged herself.



"He lost Control," she said, sobbing. "How could he? How is it possible? How could *he* lose Control?"

The others crowded around, comforting her with slogans about Courage and Caring. Guiltily, I slunk from the room. Vic and Theo stood in the hall, Vic with a hand on Theo's shoulder.

"Hey, no big deal," Vic was saying. "Just go back in there and talk to them. Reassure them. Explain that—"

Roughly, Theo knocked Vic's hand off his shoulder. "Don't push me!" he said, almost shouting. "I *can't* go back, and you know it—you know it damn well. You'd like to see me fall flat on my face, wouldn't you? You think then you could—"

Catching sight of me, Vic put a hand on Theo's arm. "We're not alone. Three deep breaths. Annie will be back tomorrow."

That seemed to do it. Theo's shoulders slumped, and he nodded weakly, leaning against the wall. Vic came over to me.

"It's Leah, right?" he said, smiling brilliantly. "So you're the little lady with the big cough."

"Yes, and I'm terribly sorry," I began. "I've got this wretched cold hanging on, and the coughs get so—"

Now Theo came over, too, forcing a smile. "It's all right," he said. "I admire the Commitment you show by coming to work even when you're not well. *I'm* the one who should apologize—and I do. I shouldn't have snapped at you. I'm always on edge when my wife

travels." He squared his shoulders and turned to Vic. "I'm going back into the Blue Room. We'll have a Motivational Moment, and we'll be fine. Resume the role-play in ten minutes."

That ended it. I got another glimpse of Theo when I took a stack of Reflection Registers to the Blue Room and saw him hurry down the hall, Del whining and sweating close behind him.

"But I *have* to talk to Mother about the pearls," Del was saying. "I haven't talked to her since she left on her Journey—not once in eight years. You *must* have her phone number."

Theo wouldn't look at him. "I have her post office box number in Glasgow, the same as you do. No phone number—the convent probably doesn't even *have* a phone. She calls me from time to time, but I have no way of calling her. This is the way she prefers to handle things, Del. She'll send a Message soon. She always sends a Message when we have a Trainers' Seminar."

"If Tessa doesn't get the pearls," Del started, but Theo had already gone into the theater and slammed the door.

Note: Two classic examples of Hierarchical Confidence Erosion. At the role-play Theo shakes the faith of those who depend on him for inspiration; then he's cold to Del, a vital supporting character in the Winchester mythos. How could such a brilliant Facilitator make such mistakes? It doesn't fit the theory. Could it be, as Theo said, that he can't function

without his wife? If so, the Hierarchy's flawed—the Prime Facilitator shouldn't be so dependent. Explore in Chapter Ten.

"Oh yuck," Rachel said. "There is a goopy, stringy white thing in my latke. What is it, Daddy? Is it a worm?"

Sam peered at it. "It's just egg white, honey. It's only natural to get a little string of the white once in a while."

"Not if you beat the eggs," Leah said. She said it under her breath, half hoping he wouldn't hear. But he did.

"You have to *beat* the eggs?" he said. "You can't just dump them in on top of the grated potatoes?"

"Well, of course you have to beat the eggs," she said, losing patience. "*Then* you add the potatoes. That just stands to reason, Sam. I didn't think I had to tell you *that*."

Both girls were shredding their latkes, searching for slimy white things and shrieking. Sam's face turned grim, cold, hard.

Detective Brock showed up a few hours later, chilly but joyful. "Thanks to you," he said, shaking the snow from his coat, "we got a real lead at last. I checked her sent-mail, and there it was—message to Del Winchester, sent nine thirty-eight P.M. Saturday. 'I have something important to tell you,' she wrote. 'But not on the phone, not at the institute. Meet me at Perkins' at noon tomorrow. There's something you need to know—I'm worried.'"

"Goodness!" Leah exclaimed.

"To get a message like that and then never get the explanation! No wonder Del was hoping I'd found a note from Cori. He must be eaten up with curiosity."

"Maybe." Brock sat down. "Or maybe he was covering up, only pretending to be curious. His apartment's not five minutes from hers. He could've gotten the message, gone to her place, gotten her to tell him this secret. Maybe it's damaging to him, and he figured he'd better kill her before she told anyone else. Then he sends the sick call on her open e-mail at ten fifteen—that's close timing, but possible—and runs off to set up his alibi."

"Del's got an alibi for ten fifteen?" Sam asked.

"For ten thirty," Brock said. "He met some folks at Alexander's for late supper. See, December twelfth is this Mother Winchester's birthday, Alexander's was her favorite restaurant, and she loved late supper. So on December twelfth a bunch of her friends always gather at Alexander's for late supper and a champagne toast."

"Who else was at the dinner?" Leah asked.

Brock checked his notes. "Theo and Annie Clay, naturally. And that guy from the infomercials, Vic Spartus, and nine other people from the institute—including your boss, Helen Rhodes."

"Any one of them would have a motive for sending the fake e-mail message," Leah said. "So it wasn't necessarily Del."

"Yeah, but he's the best sus-

pect," Brock argued. "A loser, the kind who's got a lot of pent-up stuff inside. Look at what a mess he made of that shoe company. Theo Clay pulled in huge profits—but when Del takes over, profits disappear, red ink pours in. Maybe he drinks or takes drugs, and that's why the business went bad. Maybe Cori found out, so he killed her."

Leah shook her head. It didn't fit with her impressions of Del, or with the wording of Cori's e-mail message. "You aren't going to arrest him, are you, detective?" she asked.

"Not enough evidence," he said. "Yet. But I've got a pretty good idea he did it. You keep nosing around at that institute, Mrs. Abrams. I've got a feeling you're gonna find out lots."

#### *Thursday, December 17*

Thank goodness Annie's back. I don't think we could have lasted another day without her. Theo gave a lecture to the full group of trainers this morning—Helen and I were there, to serve carrot curls and prune ambrosia—and he was in bad shape: voice shaking, hands shaking, knees shaking, everything shaking. I was afraid he'd shake apart before reaching his final exclamation point. But he made it, and everyone seemed happy.

"What a brilliant, inspiring man!" a trainer exclaimed as I handed him an ambrosia-filled plastic cup.

"He is more than a man," another trainer said solemnly, ac-

cepting a carrot curl. "He is—a personage."

Note: Fine example of the beneficial effects of Positively Impactful Hierarchy. Even when a leader temporarily falters, the employees' faith is so strong that the falter barely registers.

But it had registered with Helen, and she, like Theo, was shaking. Back at the office she sank into her chair, holding her head in her hands, too exhausted to give orders.

Feeling sorry for her, I picked up my thermos. "How'd you like some coffee, Helen?" I asked. "Nice and strong and—"

"God, no," she said, appalled. "I never drink coffee. None of us ever drinks coffee or tea or any other drug-laden substance. Here we all follow Theo's example. He gave up caffeine and all other drugs when he took over the Winchester Shoe Company, and that sacrifice was essential to his success."

"But he drinks champagne, doesn't he?" I said, remembering what Detective Brock had said about the institute's late supper.

Helen flushed. "Theo makes an exception for champagne toasts, and of course he's right. A champagne toast is a ceremony—a libation. It's not drugs. *Coffee* is drugs. Go pour that poison down a drain. Then—well, come back, get to work, but don't bother me. Just keep yourself busy."

She held her head in her hands, moaning and shaking quietly. Poor thing, I thought, and tiptoed out of her office. But no way

was I pouring my coffee down a drain. At my desk I collated a stack of memos. Then I was stuck. Helen had told me to keep busy, but I couldn't think of anything to do. Well, what did Cori do? How did she keep busy when Helen didn't have specific chores for her? She must have followed some routine.

That's when I remembered her Things to Do list. Maybe that could tell me how to keep busy. I took it out of the drawer. "Confirm reservations," "call caterers"—already done. "Check on BC in S for DW."—too cryptic to help. Or was it? "DW"—Del Winchester? Had Cori checked on BC in S for him? It was crossed off—she must have done it. Was it related to the e-mail message she'd sent him that evening? But what was "BC in S"?

I was still puzzling over it when I heard cheers in the hall and stepped out to see what was going on. There was Annie, suitcases still in hand. "My sister's better," she was saying to Theo, who stood holding her. "She told me to come home."

"I'm so glad," he said, his voice breaking. "Come with me, Annie. I need to be alone with you. I need—"

"Hush, darling," she said, embracing him more closely. "I know just what you need, and I'll take good care of you."

All sixty-three trainers, it seemed, had crowded into the hall, all applauding, some weeping. Eight years of marriage and still so eager to be alone—it was

beautiful. I sighed with the others as Theo and Annie, arms linked, walked slowly to his office. Helen had come into the hall, too, and stood off by herself, mascara-rich tears streaking her cheeks—tears of joy, I'm sure, though she didn't look particularly joyful. As for Vic, he beamed more broadly than anyone else. How could I have imagined that he might have an improper relationship with Annie, that he might be anything but a devoted Seven C's disciple?

And a few hours later, when Theo gave an afternoon lecture, when Annie sat gazing at him with unadulterated adoration while Vic led the cheers, when Helen and the trainers watched him with rapture—how could I have doubted Theo? He was magnificent—that majestic voice, those feverishly intense blue eyes, the lordly way he strode across the stage! There was no faltering now, no shaking. He was perfect. Obviously all he'd needed was Annie.

"Better," Rachel pronounced. "No worms. But they taste funny."

Sam glared. "They do not. I hand-grated the potatoes. I beat the eggs. I heated the margarine till it sizzled, I—"

"Oh, Sam!" Leah cut in. "Not margarine!"

He swallowed hard, striving for control. "Of course margarine. What else do you use for frying?"

"For latkes I use oil," she said. "For latkes everyone uses oil. That's the whole point of latkes

—that's why we eat them on Hanukkah. The oil we use to fry latkes reminds us of the oil that burned for eight days when the temple was rededicated—"

"Judah Maccabee!" Sarah shouted. "Judah the Hammer! He beat the Syrians, he cleaned up the temple, he relit the Eternal Light. And he relit it with oil! Not with lousy margarine!"

Sam snatched away her plate. "All right, Little Miss Hebrew School Know-It-All. From now on, oil."

They put the girls to bed, then walked up to the studio. Grimly Sam shaved more alabaster off the snowman. "Fiona Sanderson came by again today," he said. "She said it still isn't slim enough."

"It is," Leah protested. "It looks half melted."

"Not melted enough for Fiona. She says in Hollywood everyone adores slimness—she wants a snowman people will adore."

"She wants one they'll worship," Leah said. "She wants an idol—an idol to slimness." Disturbing ideas began clicking into place—about Hanukkah, idols, Theo Clay. But her devotion to the institute stilled them. Nonsense, she thought, and merely smiled.

#### *Friday, December 18*

An exciting day at the institute—but a crushing one for Del. The annual Message from Mother Winchester arrived.

The rumors started circulating that morning: For the first time in three years, Mother had sent a

video message. Theo would show it before the luncheon at Alexander's, to all of us.

The moment came. Theo told the waiters to keep the salad chilled and the pork chops hot, the giant video screen was lowered, and the image of Mother Winchester appeared.

It was a disappointingly blurry image and the audio was cracked, but we could see and hear enough. Mother Winchester sat in a blanket-draped chair wearing a long black dress, a thickly knit black veil half obscuring her face. Del stood next to me; I heard him draw his breath in as Mother began to speak.

"My dear children," she said. "My beloved nephew Del, the true son of my soul Theo, my precious spiritual daughter Annie, and all you Trainers and staffers who faithfully follow the Seven C's—greetings. I am so glad to speak to you one-last time."

We all gasped in unison. One last time—what did she mean?

"I am dying," she said. "I am not sad. I have had eighty-three wonderful years; for the last eight I have lived my dream of unending travel. I am ready to take a still greater Journey. My only regret is that I shall leave you, my darlings, behind."

She pointed to a thick document on her lap. "But I shall not leave you unprovided for," she said. "This is my will. Its provisions prove my love for you. For years the institute has used my home as its base. My will stipulates that my house shall become

the permanent possession of the institute, of Theo and Annie. Now my beloved institute will always have a home, a center from which to spread the truths of Creative Control."

The trainers cheered. I glanced at Del. He looked only a little disappointed. I don't think he cared much about the house.

"And now," Mother went on, "for my nephew, Del. My husband and I were never blessed with children. Ever since your parents died long ago, you have been my only blood relative. To you I leave ownership of my shoe company, and five thousand dollars."

Del's face had frozen. "But the pearls," he managed under his breath. "What about the pearls?"

"Here in this Highland convent," Mother said, "I've learned that worldly wealth is not the key to happiness. Studying the teachings of Buddha will give you that key—and living the Seven C's. That advice is more valuable than material riches. Follow it and the shoe company will prosper again. It will provide for your earthly needs. As for my other assets—cash, jewels, stocks—they are gone. I gave them to my sisters at the convent."

Poor Del couldn't speak, couldn't gasp, couldn't even sweat. The single word "jewels" had immobilized him.

"That includes the Winchester pearls," Mother went on, settling it. "I rejoice in your marriage, Del, and I remember the promise I made when I was worldly. But I now know it would be wrong to

encourage in your bride the vanity in which I indulged for too long, before Theo and Buddha showed me a better way. The pearls have been sold. The money they brought was used to feed the poor—let that thought warm your heart."

The trainers broke into applause, and Theo and Annie nodded at each other in approval. But Del, white-faced, turned his back on the video screen and stumbled from the room.

Concerned, I hurried after him. He sat slumped on a bench in the lobby. "The pearls are gone," he said. "I'm ruined."

"But she left you the shoe company," I pointed out.

He shook his head. "It's nearly bankrupt. I'll pump the five thousand into it, but that won't help long. The machinery's over fifty years old—it breaks down constantly. Nobody wants to buy our designs. We had plenty of customers in Theo's day, but I messed up the computers when I took over—I can't even find his sales records. If I'd gotten those pearls, I could've bought new machinery, I could've hired better designers, I could've—"

"But the pearls were for Tessa," I said, confused.

His head jerked back. "Oh. Yes. But we'd decided to use them as collateral for a loan and put the money into the company. When we got the loan paid off, the pearls would've been ours. But there's no chance of that now. There's nothing now."

We sat, both silent, until we



heard the cheers that greeted the end of the video. He shrugged and walked off unsteadily. Back at the office I had an unpleasant exchange with Helen. She'd noticed Del leave the banquet and thought it disgraceful that he hadn't stayed to hear the end of the Message.

"Well, Mother Winchester had promised to leave him her pearls," I explained. "It was a big disappointment for him."

Barely suppressing her rage, Helen tossed Mother's video into a file drawer. "Life's full of disappointments—some a lot bitterer than that. Del got off easy. Mother left him the shoe company, didn't she? What more does he need?"

"But the company's not doing well," I pointed out.

"Only because Del's not trying," Helen said. "Only because he doesn't *really* follow the Seven C's. He says he does, but he obviously doesn't. The Seven C's *never* fail. If Del followed them faithfully, he'd be a success. Well. Tomorrow, we'll—"

"But tomorrow's Saturday," I objected. "I'm not coming in."

Helen staggered, grabbing the edge of her desk for support. "Not coming in? It's Day Six of the seminar!"

"It's also my sabbath," I said. "It's a day of rest. I'll come in on Sunday, if you like, but not on Saturday."

She stared at me. "A day of rest! In the middle of a Seven C's seminar, you talk about *rest*? You'd let the institute down, let

*Theo* down, to *rest*? My God! This time, you've really pi—annoyed me. Fine. Stay home tomorrow. Rest. Then come in Sunday, for the last day of the seminar, and then never come back. I have no use for someone with no sense of priorities."

"Neither do I," I said hotly. Talk about Negative Impactfulness! I felt like quitting right then. But I'd promised to help Detective Brock, and Sunday would be my last chance to scrounge for clues at the institute.

Sam threw down his fork. "I give up. I fried the stupid things in oil, and they *still* aren't as light as yours. Maybe I'm using too much flour. Maybe I should—"

"You're using *flour*?" Leah said incredulously. "Not matzo meal? Well, my goodness, Sam. No wonder."

Silently he cleared the plates. Detective Brock phoned later that night. He'd been looking into Del's finances—the shoe company was on the verge of going under. Maybe Cori found out about some financial improprieties and threatened to tell Mother Winchester, and he'd killed her to keep her silent.

You're wrong, Leah thought, but didn't know how to convince him. On impulse she invited him to Saturday dinner. They'd relax over good food and wine, they'd watch the girls light the candles, he'd get feeling cosy, and she'd straighten him out.

He accepted, and Sam approved. "I'll cook," he said. "We

can't have you coughing all over the food. I'll make poulet en casserole, and my mother's cucumber salad."

"That sounds delicious," she said honestly. Nobody could beat Sam at poulet en casserole, and the cucumber salad was a classic. "And maybe rice. That goes so well with—"

Sam's face hardened. "No rice. I'm damn well making latkes."

"Great chicken," Detective Brock said contentedly. "Great salad. And the latkes are just about the best I ever had."

Sam put down his fork. "Just about?"

Brock shrugged. "Well, yeah. I mean, they're real good, but—what kinda onion you use? Regular ones, right? Grated? My neighbor had me to Hanukkah dinner once, and she used chopped green onions in the latkes. Amazing! You oughtta try it."

Sam looked to Leah, and she shrugged and nodded helplessly. "That's what I use, too."

Sam sulked straight through dessert, not cheering up until they lit the menorah. No one could sulk through that. Sarah and Rachel took turns lighting candles, then bore up stoically as they dropped half the coins they received as gelt in the charity box. Sighing cosily, Brock settled back on the sofa.

"Pretty nice holiday you've got going here," he observed. "Food, family time, all that. And it's all about a war, right?"

"A war fought for religious free-

dom," Sam said. "The first ever, about four hundred years before Jesus was born. The Syrians—well, the Greeks, really, but also the Syrians, it's sorta confusing—had control of Israel. And this king, Antiochus, tried to make the Jews worship idols. He killed them when they refused."

"Hey, that's not right," Brock said, getting stirred up.

"I mean, who wants to worship idols? That's stupid—it's bad."

"It is, but some people still do it," Leah said. Things started clicking into place again, and this time she didn't stop them. "We don't worship statues of Zeus any more, but we still worship false gods. Sam, did Fiona come by again?"

Sam nodded, lifting his hands hopelessly. "Thinner. She still thinks the snowman's fat. She wants it thinner."

"Because she worships a false idea of physical beauty," Leah said, "even when it makes no sense. She's utterly, unreasonably devoted to it. Isn't that idolatry? And the people at the institute—they worship success. They almost worship Theo Clay."

"But he's quite a guy, right?" Brock asked. "You said lotsa nice things about him at dinner—how well he speaks, how good he is at making folks feel special, what great ideas he has—"

"They're standard ideas," Leah said, blushing to hear her praise echoed. "He's just found a clever way to package them. And he's the most important part of the package—his personality, his ca-

reer, his marriage. People worship his ideas because they want to be like him. And he is an impressive man—but only a man. He has flaws. But we're so determined to keep worshipping this—this idol he's become that we refuse to see them."

"Don't say 'we,' Leah," Sam objected. "Don't include yourself. You're not the kind to worship an idol."

"I didn't think I was," she said, shaking her head ruefully. "But I got caught up in it. I made excuses for him—I found ways to keep believing he was perfect, even when I saw things that told me he wasn't. It was wrong—now that I've been away from the institute for a day, I see how wrong it was. But when I was in the middle of it, I made the same mistakes everyone else did."

Sam patted her hand. "Well, you're away from it now. Stay away. Call in sick tomorrow. You are still sick, you know."

"Just barely. No, Sam. I promised Helen I'd come in, and I want one last chance to find evidence for Detective Brock."

"Don't go in on my account," Brock began. "If you're sick—"

"I'm nearly well." She stood up to collect their coffee cups. "One good night's sleep, and I'll be fine."

But sleep refused to settle. For the first hours, her rest was broken by coughs and a rush of half-dreams, half-thoughts—Annie and Vic taping in the Little Theater, Theo throwing a tantrum in the Blue Room, Helen weeping in the hall, Del showing off pho-

tos of his bride, Mother Winchester's portrait smiling down on all of them. And Cori crossing items off her Things to Do list with a red Magic Marker. This was the last image, the one that came just before the pounding brought her clear awake.

Sam sat up in bed. "I don't believe it. Someone's at the door. At three forty-five in the morning! If it's Fiona again—" But it was Del, snow-dusted but still, somehow, sweaty. He shivered and hiccupped. "Sorry, so sorry," he sobbed. "Late, so late. But after the video you were nice to me."

"Of course," she said, letting him in and taking his coat. "Sam, maybe we could have some hot chocolate." She got a whiff of Del's breath and changed her mind. "No. Make that coffee."

Del didn't want coffee. "Just wanna stay here," he said, sinking onto the couch. "No more alone—couldn't stand more."

"Have you called your wife?" she asked gently.

He burped bitterly. "Good idea. Call my dear, sweet wife. Gotta still have her dear, sweet agent's number somewhere."

"Her agent?" Leah said, puzzled. "Tessa has an agent?"

"You betcha." Del fumbled the photos from his wallet. "Every model's got an agent. Tessa's a model. 'Course, not really Tessa. Terri, Tracey—I forget. I thought of Tessa. Classier."

Leah struggled to grasp it. "Then you're not really—"

"Not really married." Finally he accepted coffee. "Who'd marry

me? But I needed the pearls. So I fly to Texas, call an agency, and this local model—real looker, lots of Sears ads—poses. Came home, big news—I'm engaged! Congratulations! Best wishes! No pearls! Whoops! Back to Texas for wedding photos."

"And nobody doubted your stories about Tessa?" Leah asked.

He shrugged. "Nobody cared. Worked smooth—but no pearls. Mother'd probably already sold them. Never thought she'd do that. Thought she'd keep her promise. She used to be so strict about promises, lies, all that. Fifteen, I cheated on a math quiz, got caught—whammo! Kicked me out of her house, sent me to boarding school. But she's changed. Saw it eight years ago when she didn't get mad at Theo for dumping Helen—"

"Helen?" Leah exclaimed. "Helen Rhodes?"

Del nodded. "Helen and Theo, happy couple. Date set, whole deal. Then, whammo! Helen's out, Annie's it. Mother won't like it, I thought—nasty postcard's coming. But she sends them a case of champagne. Well, Theo's special. But I thought she'd keep *her* promise. Buddhist convent must've changed her even more."

Buddhist convent—Leah hadn't put the words together that way before. Buddhist convent—BC. "Where is this convent, Del? In the video Mother Winchester called it a 'Highland convent.'"

"Scotland," he said. "Don't know just where."

The item on the Things to Do list came back—"check out BC in

S for DW." "Did you ask Cori to find the convent?" she asked.

He nodded. "Wanted to go see Mother, make her understand. Cori was good at tracking stuff down—telephone, Internet—and she'd do favors. I liked her. I think she found something out—she said so, on e-mail—but she got killed before she could tell me. I lost Cori, lost my chance to see Mother. My life is over."

"Don't say that," Sam said, not getting it. "You're young, you've got your health, and the shoe company—"

"That damn shoe company!" Del started to slam his cup down but chickened out. "For eight years I put everything into it—every cent my parents left me. I took out loans, I lied about collateral, it's all gone into the company, and we never turned a real profit. When it goes under, I'll be so deep in debt I'll never get out. And if the banks find out I lied—"

Suddenly he wanted his coat—they couldn't make him stay. He had to walk, he said. They watched him fade into the snow.

"That's a disturbed man," Sam said. "If Cori did track down that convent, if she found out about the pearls, he might have lashed out at her from pure despair—and might not even have a clear memory of what happened."

"No," she said. "Cori must have made contact with the convent, since she crossed the item off her list, but we don't know what she found out or what, if anything, she told Del." She rubbed her forehead. "That Things to Do list!

I keep thinking there's something else important there, but what?"

"Everything was crossed out, right?" Sam asked.

"All but the last item. Cori meant to set up the Blue Room. She'd started to, but then I guess she felt too sick—"

"Brock said she *wasn't* really sick," Sam pointed out.

Leah stared at him. "Sam, I'm an idiot. She wasn't sick. That's not why she dumped the folders on the table and scattered the pencils. Something upset her—that's why she ran home."

"Something in the Blue Room upset her," he said. "Did she find something, hear something, see something?"

"See something?" Leah sat down. "The two-way mirror, you can see into the Little Theater. And it was late—people would figure the place was empty, and they'd let down their guard."

"So who did Cori see?" Sam asked. "And what was he doing?"

Leah thought it over. "I wondered once if there might be something between Annie and that announcer, Vic. Maybe there is. Maybe they were—well, getting intimate in the Little Theater."

Sam nodded. "That'd upset Cori—seeing that the Clay marriage isn't perfect, seeing one of her idols commit adultery. Maybe she was so shocked she dropped the pencils, and Vic and Annie heard it and saw her run down the hall. It'd be dangerous to confront her at the institute, so Vic went to her apartment. If he knocked

and said he wanted to explain, she'd let him in."

"And if she threatened to tell Theo, Vic might get panicky enough to hit her," Leah said. "Oh, Sam! This could be it!"

"Or maybe," Sam suggested, "it was Theo Clay and Helen Rhodes that Cori saw. Del said they were once engaged. Maybe they've re-kindled the flame—and then they killed Cori to cover up."

She shook her head. "I can't see it. Theo's so devoted to Annie—he falls apart when she's not around. He depends on her."

"Dependence doesn't always mean love. Maybe he needs Annie psychologically, but he's still attracted to Helen physically. Anyway, I think we're onto something. Should we call Brock?"

She looked at the clock. "At four thirty on Sunday morning? Unless we're really sure, I'd rather not call him on Sunday at all—it's his day of rest. No, I'll just go back for my last day at the institute—there's something I want to check out."

*Sunday, December 20*

Arrived at seven thirty thinking I'd beat Helen to the institute. But she and Vic were already standing in the hallway outside the Logistical Support Office, arguing with a very disheveled Del.

"You can't see him now," Helen was saying. "He's terribly busy—he's rehearsing for the closing session."

"She's dying." Del's eyes were dull but frantic. "I don't have

much time left. And Theo *must* know how to find her. I have to say goodbye. She never said goodbye to me before she left."

I slipped past them into the office, ran to Helen's file cabinet—thank God she doesn't lock it—and got Mother's video. There's a VCR in the Blue Room, and I had to see the end of this tape—I'd missed it when I'd followed Del into the hall, and it might be important. Wild thoughts had come to me in the night, too wild to share with Detective Brock or even with Sam. Probably I was wrong. But maybe not.

Helen was too busy shouting at Del to notice as I left the office. No one else was around—the trainers weren't due until nine. I walked to the Blue Room, let myself in, glanced at the two-way mirror—and saw Annie and Theo in the Little Theater. Annie stood, frowning; Theo huddled in a chair, sobbing.

The video suddenly seemed less important. Quietly I set it on the table and switched on the one-way audio.

Theo was pleading. "I'm not talking about a lot—just a little more or I'll never get through the day. All the pressure of the closing session, and the way Del keeps hounding me! He makes me feel so guilty. Maybe we should let him have the house."

"Del gets nothing more," Annie said firmly. "Neither do you. I can say you're sick and have Vic lead the closing session."

He made himself stand up. "You'd like that. You'd like to push

me out—you're grooming him to take over. I won't have it. Sleep with him all you want, but if you think I'll let you—"

Mid-sentence, the door to the Little Theater was thrown open, and Del stumbled in, with Helen and Vic just behind.

And Del had a gun. He was trembling so fiercely that he had to use both hands to point it at Theo. "Tell me how to find Mother," he said. "If she'll change her will, I can sell the house and settle my debts. If you don't tell, I'll shoot. I'll go to prison for fraud anyway. It might as well be for murder."

I had frozen in horror, watching. And then Helen screamed and tackled Del from behind, knocking him to the floor.

"I won't let you hurt him!" she cried. "I won't! I won't!"

She slammed his hand against the floor, and the gun flew from his grasp. Vic and Theo rushed to her, helping her to her feet. Slowly Annie crossed the room, removed the scarf she wore around her neck, and used it to pick up the gun.

Del was a squirming mass on the floor. "This isn't the end of it!" he sobbed. "I'll hire a lawyer to rip that will apart! I'll hire a private detective—he'll track Mother down!"

Theo looked at Annie in terror. "If he does that—my God, Annie! We can't let him!"

"Of course we can't." Her voice was flat and certain. She looked down at Del, shaking her head slightly. "You've been a nuisance



for years; now you've gone too far. I really don't think we can put up with you any more." She looked up. Helen, Theo, and Vic stood in a pale, staring cluster. She held out the gun. "He could have been shot in the scuffle," she said.

Theo took a step back. "But he wasn't," he said.

Again Annie shook her head slightly. "He could have been. That would end it—no more questions, no more threats. Just one more small tragedy. He burst in drunk and threatened to kill you. There was a scuffle. He was shot. We were all witnesses."

He glanced at Del, who still lay on the floor, crying. "My God," he said. "You want me to kill him?"

"No," she said. "Theo Clay can't kill Mother's nephew. Theo Clay would find a better way to Control the situation. And not me and not Vic—we're too important to the institute." She held the gun out again, in a more definite direction. "Helen."

Helen shrank from her. "Why not just call the police and—"

"Afterwards," Annie said. "It's self-defense, Helen; you won't go to jail. A few questions, a little unpleasantness—not much of a sacrifice. Theo needs you to do this. Del can hurt Theo. I can't explain why; you have to believe. Save Theo."

Numbly, Helen looked down at Del, thought, and bit her lip. "If Theo tells me to," she said.

She looked at Annie, and she nodded. "Helen," he said gently, "please do this for me. I want you to."

Helen held out her hand, and Annie gave her the gun.

There's no phone in the Blue Room—I couldn't call the police, and they wouldn't get here in time even if I could. But I had to do something. I flipped the two-way audio switch.

"Helen!" I shouted. "For God's sake, don't shoot!"

That stopped it, all right. They all stared at the two-way mirror—even Del managed to get to his knees and blink at it. "Who the hell is that?" Annie demanded.

"It's the temp," I shot back. "I heard everything—if you shoot, I'll tell the police it's murder, and you'll all go to prison. And it'll all be for nothing. Theo isn't a god, Helen. He's—he's a murderer and a fraud and a drug addict."

I'd said more than I knew. But the words had an effect. Clutching the gun in both hands and holding it out, Helen flattened her back against the wall. Theo, Annie, and Vic stepped away from her, and no wonder—the panic in her eyes was terrifying. And her gun was pointed right at me.

"You're lying," she said. "You don't know anything."

"I know a lot," I said, although I didn't really. But I could guess. First, though, I stepped a few inches to the right. Her gun was pointed at nothing now. Two-way mirrors can come in handy. "He killed Cori," I said, "or he let Annie kill her. And he killed Mother Winchester, too, eight years ago."

Helen gasped, and the gun faltered. "You're crazy," she said.

"Mother Winchester's in a Buddhist convent in Scotland."

"There are no Buddhist convents in Scotland." That was *really* more than I knew. But even if there were Buddhist convents in Scotland, I was almost sure that Mother wasn't staying at any of them, and that Cori found that out on the day she died. "Think, Helen. Mother leaves suddenly, without saying goodbye to her nephew, and for eight years no one sees her or talks to her. There's nothing but a post office box number, an occasional letter, a video every few years. There is no Mother Winchester."

"There is!" Helen insisted, sobbing. "I saw the video."

"Yes, and you also saw the pictures of Del's wife," I said. "But you don't have a wife, do you, Del?"

He stood up and stopped sweating. "I don't," he said. "There's no Tessa. I made her up."

"Just as Theo made up the story of Mother's travels," I said. "He had to make it up, to hide her murder. What happened, Theo? Mother hated cheats and liars—Del told me that. Did she find out you'd been cheating and lying about the shoe company?"

Finally Theo managed to speak. "I never cheated or lied," he said—but he was shaking. "I saved that company."

"How?" I demanded. "With the nursery-school management principles of the Seven C's? I've got a damn Ph.D., Theo—I know that stuff is crap. You faked the company's success the same way Del

kept it breathing for eight years—by pumping cash into it and cooking the books. Where'd you get the cash? Did you give Mother a story about using her pearls as collateral for a loan? Is that when you sold them? What happened when Mother found out? Did she threaten to expose you? How did you react? You've got a temper—you showed it when you blew up at me for coughing."

Finally Annie collected herself as I'd known she would. She's that type. "Vic," she said, "go to the Blue Room, grab her, and bring her here. Two people can be shot in a scuffle."

But Vic didn't move. He looked to Annie, tears in his eyes. "Theo didn't really kill Mother, did he?" he asked. "And if he did, you didn't know about it until now, did you?"

"Of course she did," I said. "When Theo killed Mother, who would he turn to? Not Helen—she was his fiancée, but she's emotional, no good in an emergency. Annie has no emotions—she's great in an emergency. What deal did you make, Annie? 'Okay, Theo. I'll hide the body, I'll leave the country in disguise, I'll send the first fake letter, I'll sabotage the shoe company's computers so the system will crash when Del takes over and no one will know what you've done—but you have to marry me.'"

The sound that escaped from Helen was half gasp, half cry, pure pain. "Is that why, Theo? Is that why you left me?"

"That's exactly why," I said, hoping I was right. "Annie's been

his partner all through the coverup. He doesn't love her—he loves *you*—but he needs her. He's not quite as evil as she. He kills, but he has a conscience. He feels bad afterwards. So she gives him drugs, to help him past his conscience. That's why he falls apart when she goes on her trips. Think about her trips. She visits her sick sister in Wichita, and a few days later her sister's fine and a video from Mother arrives. Did she really go to Wichita? Or did she go to Scotland to mail the video?"

Woodenly Helen walked forward, pressing the gun against the mirror.

"I saw the video," she said. "If it wasn't Mother, who was it?"

"Annie," I said, guessing. "She and Theo filmed the video in the Little Theater last Saturday. Cori came to the Blue Room to set up and saw them. She already knew there are no Buddhist convents in Scotland—she was already suspicious. When she saw them taping, she was sure. She ran home, sent Del an e-mail message—and then foolishly opened her door when Annie promised to explain. They killed her, too. Don't let them kill Del. They don't deserve your devotion—everything about them is false. And Vic—whatever lies Annie told you, don't believe them any longer. You're not part of it yet. Break free, before it's too late."

I didn't think it would work. It was too much of a longshot—logically, it *shouldn't* have worked. But it did. Helen turned away

from the mirror and pointed her gun at Theo and Annie. "Vic," she said, "call the police."

It was Monday, the eighth and last night of Hanukkah, and Detective Brock was again their dinner guest. "I don't know how you did it, Mrs. Abrams," he said. "You took some chances, did some fancy guessing. But everything you said turned out right."

Leah lowered her voice so the girls wouldn't hear. "You found the body, then?"

"Oh yeah," Brock said cheerfully. "Under the garage. Lab tests conclusive—Mother Winchester all right. Plus Theo confessed. You were right: He *does* have a conscience, sorta—enough to make him feel bad when he does wrong, not enough to make him do right. Consciences like that aren't worth much except when it comes to confessions. At least he confessed a bunch. He killed Mother in a rage when she found out he'd robbed her blind, faked his success at the shoe company. Annie covered it up, kept him going with uppers when he felt too guilty. Annie killed Cori after Cori saw them taping the fake video. Theo sat in the car and shuddered. Some guru *he* turned out to be."

"He promises to show others the path to Control but can't control his own life," Leah said, pouring herself a second glass of wine, getting dreamy. "And he has eyes but cannot see. He didn't even know what Annie and Vic were planning, did he?"

"Well, I don't know how much Vic knew about the plan," Brock said. "Maybe more than he says. But it looks like Annie planned to feed Theo an overdose someday, put Vic in his place. My guess is, Vic was a believer—in Annie, not Theo. He didn't know about what had happened to Mother, or Cori. So we're not pressing charges against him—or Helen. I've got no problem seeing them as dupes."

"And Del Winchester?" Leah asked anxiously. "He *did* threaten Theo with a deadly weapon, and he—"

"Vic and Helen refuse to testify against him, and Theo and Annie aren't credible. Unless you annoy me with testimony I don't want to hear, he's clean. He's got a new lawyer—my cousin—and since the will's fake, and he's Mother Winchester's only living relative, he'll get the house, maybe all the Seven C's assets. He's selling it all off. I stopped by the institute today, and he was scrub-

bing the Seven C's logos off the doors, getting the house ready to show to realtors."

"Good for him," Leah said, and stopped short. Sam was bringing a platter of latkes to the table.

They sang the blessing over bread, with Detective Brock listening respectfully, and passed the platter. "So you don't have to go back to that place again, Mommy?" Sarah asked. "You caught all the bad guys?"

"Well, I didn't really catch anybody," Leah said. "The police did. But the bad guys've been caught, yes. I don't have to go back there any more. And my cold is all better."

Tentatively, Rachel speared a latke. The hand-grated potatoes, rinsed and soaked and squeezed; the well-beaten eggs; the matzo meal; the chopped green onions; the delicate scent of oil. She bit, chewed, swallowed, smiled.

"Then everything's fine," she said. "Even the latkes. It's a miracle."

#### LEAH'S LATKES

5 medium potatoes

2 large eggs

3 T. matzo meal

6 green onions, chopped fine

1 T. lemon juice

1 t. salt

dash pepper

oil

Grate potatoes by hand, rinse in cold water, soak in bowl of cold water, rinse again, and squeeze all water out. Beat eggs; add matzo meal, salt, pepper, lemon juice; mix well. Add potatoes and onion and mix again. Drop batter by tablespoonfuls into hot oil, making latkes about 3" in diameter. Fry until underside is browned; turn to brown again. Drain on paper towels. Serves six.

FICTION

# SKIN GAME

D. H. Reddall



**I**n the dream it is night. For reasons not apparent to me, I am standing on railroad tracks, naked and cold.

A violent wind whips the trees, bending them almost parallel to the ground.

I feel the train before I see it, the rumor of its approach transmitted through rail and tie to my feet. And then it looms into view, swaying heavily from side to side as it thunders down the moonlit tracks towards me.

I try to run, but my legs are frozen in a paralysis of fear. The train's lantern glows blood red. Its whistle splits the night, rising in pitch until it becomes a terrible human scream. . . .

I woke abruptly, heart beating out arpeggios of alarm. It took a few seconds for the jangling of the telephone to register.

"Charles. It's Eddie Olivera."

"Uh-huh." Late-night phone calls usually mean bad news, especially when there's a cop on the other end.

"I'm at the Ocean Street docks. You'd better come down here." A pause. "It's Ray. He's dead."

Fifteen minutes later Olivera waved me into the parking lot of a restaurant by the pier. He led me around to where a Dumpster was backed up against a small stand of sumac. "Couple of fishermen were throwing stuff in the Dumpster and found him."

Ray was lying next to the bin, curled up in a ball. He might have been sleeping one off except for the damage to his head.

"Weapon?"

"Not yet."

The photographer finished up, and someone else started to outline the body for future reference. Harry Klein walked over.

"Sorry, Charles."

"Thanks. What can you tell me?"

The M.E. adjusted his glasses. "Well, the body's cooled down to about ninety-one degrees. There is some early rigor in the face, jaw, and neck. I'd say he's been dead about five hours, give or take. Cause of death, severe trauma to the head. He was clubbed to death. Here. Not moved here after."

The sky was getting that orange color to the east that precedes the dawn. Sparrows were juking around in the bushes, squabbling over food or territory. There was a strong smell of brine and privet and fish in the air. A good day to be alive.

Over Klein's shoulder I watched the EMT's load Ray into the ambulance and close the doors against the glare of flashing lights. Olivera said, "Was Ray working?" I nodded. "On what?"

"Small stuff. Insurance fraud for Indemnity. A couple of skip traces. There hasn't been anything big enough lately to require doubling up."

"What about his personal life?"

"Hell, Ray's personal life was a mess. Sheila put him out again, he owed money all over the place, his car was falling apart. Nothing in any of it to warrant this, though."

"Okay. You come up with anything, I'm the next guy to know."



Don't go and do something you'll regret later. I'm serious about that, Charles."

"Sure, Eddie."

I watched him walk to his car, a decent police officer and as close to a friend as a cop can get. Sure, he'd be the next to know. Right after the guy who scratched Ray.

I went to the office, threw open the windows, and got the coffee going. Then I sat down at Ray's desk. It was in its usual state, a confusion of papers and magazines. I put it all in one pile and started going through it.

When I'd told Olivera that Ray and I were working separately, it was only part of it. The fact is that, although we were friends, I never liked sharing a case with Ray. He was a little too impetuous. On one occasion his aggressiveness nearly got us killed. After that I told him that we could continue to share office space and secretarial services, but that as far as I was concerned we'd pursue our own cases.

Predictably, he got his back up, and even a year later our relationship was still strained. Now he was dead and I wondered if I shared some of the blame. If he'd gotten in over his head and needed backup, he wouldn't have felt he could turn to me. Maybe if he had, he'd still be alive.

The magazines yielded nothing, their focus being either firearms or nude women. Most of the papers were statement forms, contracts, and overdue bills. A

quick look through the drawers turned up only five handguns. Ray had had an almost mystical regard for firearms. I think he became a private investigator partly because it gave him a reason to carry a weapon. He owned dozens of them and spent a lot of time on the firing range.

It hadn't mattered at the end: his .38 was still in its holster when they found him.

After Vietnam I'd had enough of weapons.

I came home war-weary, disillusioned, and at loose ends. The military had instilled in me a horror of uniforms and authority. Incapable of wearing a suit and indisposed to taking orders, I went to work for my cousin as a carpenter. He had the good sense to show me what was required, get me started, and then leave me alone.

It was good honest work. Nail two boards together, they stay nailed. At the end of the day there were a lot of boards nailed together, and I could step back and see what I'd accomplished. The pay wasn't great, but I was outside and there were no fat, coffee-swilling career malingerers sending me on one meaningless detail after another.

One day about a year later I ran into an army buddy who had set himself up as a private investigator. Two beers later he asked me to sign on.

"I've got lots of work, Charles. You'd be on your own a lot, no boss except me, no set schedule, room to be as creative as you want.

Make more than banging nails. And there's always the possibility of action. Hell, you're a natural."

No schedule and no boss were inducement enough, but it was the prospect of action that decided me because the truth was that I was bored. The solitude and the comfortable rhythms of carpentry had been just what I needed when I returned from the war. But after shingling scores of side walls and building dozens of decks, tedium set in. I needed a change.

I worked for my friend until he decided to relocate to California. By then I had enough time in to qualify for my own license.

Then the cycle repeated itself. Ray was an army buddy looking for action, and I took him on. Only now it was Ray who had relocated, not me.

Next to the phone was a notepad on which was written a single word: "wrath." It signified nothing to me, and I stuck it in the drawer with the rest. Then I threw away the paperweight and the desk calendar and nobody could tell that Ray had ever been there.

"Chambers here?" He was a florid little guy in a rumpled blue pinstriped suit. A few strands of gray hair stretched from three o'clock to nine o'clock across a scalp ravaged by time.

"Nope."

He glanced at the lettering on the door. "Okay, you must be Stubblefield," he said, brandishing a cigar big enough to warrant

a batboy. "Where's Chambers? He's supposed to keep in touch. I haven't heard from him in almost a week."

"Mr. Chambers no longer works here. Or anywhere. He's dead."

"Jesus!" The little man's eyes widened. "An accident?"

I shook my head.

"What's it all about?"

"I don't know yet, Er—"

"Swinney. Call me Bud." The name was familiar. I'd just seen it on one of Ray's contracts. "He was working on something for me, but I didn't think—you mind if I sit down?"

"What was Ray doing for you, Mr. Swinney?"

He looked around for an ashtray, gave up and used the wastebasket. He looked me over with watery blue eyes.

"I own several businesses—some laundries, couple of car-washes, a motel. Got a diner over in Centerville. I employ a lot of people, and a lot of them are foreigners." He held up a hand. "I'm not a philanthropist. I hire the immigrants because I can pay them less and get some of it back by renting them rooms in my motel. But it works out all around—I save money, they make money, at least compared to what they could make back home. And without exception, they are decent hardworking people."

"Anyway, a couple of months ago I start getting the phone calls. Rough stuff: 'Stop hiring the wetbacks or we're going to shut you down. Hire American.' That sort of thing. I just hang up,

you know." He paused to pick his teeth with a little fingernail.

"But then a couple of my employees get roughed up. A kid from India, another from Senegal. The Senegalese guy was hospitalized for awhile. They really worked him over. And I've got a Vietnamese guy who had his car forced off the road one night. He's okay, but his wife got banged up a little. Cops wrote it off as a drunk driver, but I'm not so sure. And then the kid who cleans up the laundromats found a device behind the dryers. This is a couple of weeks ago."

"What kind of device?"

"A firebomb. A gallon-size plastic jug of gasoline, and a cigarette with a hole in it halfway up. There's a fuse running from the hole in the cigarette to the gas. The cigarette burns up to the fuse, and you can imagine the rest. Thank God it burned itself out before it reached the fuse."

"You notify the police?"

Swinney waved a plump hand. "Sure, sure, and they did their thing, but then next day Waxman gets hit."

"Who's Waxman?"

"A friend of mine. He owns a movie theater, a couple of adult bookstores. And we're partners in the motel. Same thing: incendiary device. Only this one goes off in one of his bookstores. Lucky for him the firehouse is only two blocks away. Still, he took quite a bit of damage. So we talked it over and decided to hire a private dick to try to move things along before someone gets killed."

"Confidential investigator."

"How's that?"

"We don't think of ourselves as dicks. We're confidential investigators."

"Oh," said Swinney, uncertain whether to laugh or apologize.

"You have any ideas, Mr. Swinney?"

He shrugged. "Maybe some right-wing America-first wacko. I don't know. I got another call last night. Guy asked if I heard about Waxman. Said next time I wouldn't be so lucky."

"Same voice as before?"

"Aw hell, I don't know. They always call in the middle of the night, I'm half asleep. It's always a man's voice, if that helps." He leaned forward, pointing the cigar at me. "Will you take over here?" He dug out his wallet and found a piece of paper. "Here's my contract with Chambers. Change the name or whatever and see what you can do. The people who work for me are scared and to tell the truth, so am I."

Swinney gave me the names of his employees and I prepared a new contract, assuring him that I'd honor the previous agreement, which is to say the retainer he'd paid Ray.

Who says chivalry is dead?

I stopped for coffee before going to see Sheila. I wasn't looking forward to the visit. At the best of times I am socially inept and uncomfortable with people, unsure of the conventions that govern situations like death. Sometimes

words are simply inadequate, but I never know what to replace them with.

Waiting for the cappuccino, I checked out the bulletin board, where a poster caught my eye, an ad for a band called Rath. It was purple and black and featured an X-ray of a skull. Lightning bolts were shooting into the skull. Or maybe out. "Post punk" the poster proclaimed.

"What does 'post punk' mean?" I asked the girl when she brought my coffee. She was thin, attractive, black hair, black clothes, black eye shadow. Except for the three rings piercing her lower lip and another dozen rimming one ear, she could have stepped out of the Village circa 1965.

She glanced at the poster. "Oh, you know, they're like hot."

"Hot."

"Yeah. They're happening. You know." She looked me up and down. I could see her struggling to find the right category for me. Then she got it: middle-aged dork. "They're playing at the Wrecking Ball, but I don't—well, they're kind of like loud."

I paid for the coffee and left, feeling kind of like old.

Sheila met me at the door of her cottage, a tall angular woman, hair tied back in a neat bun, a pair of soft brown eyes now puffy and inflamed. She was wearing jeans and an embroidered brown sweater a shade lighter than her skin. I took her hands, squeezing gently.

"Sheila, I—"

"No. Don't say anything,

Charles. It's okay. Come on in." I followed her into the living room. From the kitchen came muted sounds of a TV audience cheering on a game show contestant. "I'm done crying. The truth is, we were really through this time." She forced a thin smile. "In the current vernacular, Ray was afraid of commitment. I didn't push him, but he was aware of how I felt, about getting married I mean." She studied her hands. "I don't know what he was thinking. Maybe that he had to be available in case Sharon Stone or Robin Givens called him up for a date." She shrugged. "Anyway, I knew he was seeing other women. He was just so damn *careless*, so thoughtless sometimes. Always counting on everyone to forgive him his debts and his lack of loyalty."

"He cared for you a great deal," I said, and it was true. Ray had never tried to pretend otherwise.

"I know he did. Just not enough, I guess."

"It's bad timing, but I need to ask you a couple of things, okay?"

"Sure. The cops left a little while ago. They actually wanted to know where I was all last night. Can you believe that?"

"That's their job."

She gave me a level look. "And what's yours? Avenging angel? Code of honor and all that masculine crap?"

"Ray was my partner and my friend. I want to find out who did this, yes. Are you aware of any special problems he was having, a particular enmity perhaps?"

"If there was one, he didn't mention it to me. His most recent girlfriend was single, so you can rule out the enraged husband."

"I'm sorry, Sheila. I really am."

She was biting back the tears as I left, feeling clumsy and useless.

When I arrived at the Wrecking Ball that night, the band was already cranked up. It was so loud that I checked the roof. So far it wasn't flapping up and down. On the other hand I thought the walls might be bulging just a bit. I paid at the door, got my hand stamped, and walked into a solid wall of sound.

Rath was crammed onto a tiny platform at the far end of the room: drums, bass, and three guitars. Stacked behind them were several thousand dollars' worth of amps and speakers.

The guitarists were chopping at their instruments while the singer screamed unintelligibly into his mike. The overall effect was that of a jumbo jet landing without wheels.

A couple of dozen dancers were leaping around as if being attacked by wasps. The males were wearing baggy shorts, T-shirts, and baseball caps worn backwards. Anyone who dressed like that when I was a kid was either simple or a member of the chess club.

I grew up playing Little Richard and Screamin' Jay Hawkins records until my father suggested that I might be happier attending military school. Listen-

ing to Rath, I thought my father a model of restraint. I doubted any of them knew more than half a dozen chords except for the lead guitarist, who had obviously studied Eddie Van Halen.

When they took a break, I approached the singer. He was sitting in a booth with two other band members and three girls wearing permanently stunned expressions.

"Hey," I said, "you guys are hot. Interested in some work?"

The leader looked me over. He was thick through the neck and shoulders, his pecs and biceps straining against the black T-shirt. Several tattoos adorned both arms.

"Where?"

"I'm opening a club down in Fall River. The Third Rail. You guys would fit right in."

His eyes never left mine.

"Isaac."

"Yo." Isaac was a lanky kid with huge eyes and long, thin fingers. He was the bass player.

"Heard of a club in Fall River called the Third Rail?"

"Nope."

"Isn't open yet," I said. "Didn't you guys talk to my partner, Ray Chambers?" Isaac had turned away to talk to one of the girls. When I mentioned Ray's name, I saw him freeze for just a second.

"You got the wrong band," said the singer.

I put on my best innocent look. "Gee, Ray left me a note, said he was negotiating with you guys. Of course, I haven't seen him in a few days."

"And I said I never heard of your partner or anyplace called the Third Rail, and all bookings are made through me. Anything else?"

I decided not to push it. "Guess not. Like you say: wrong band."

I got up early the following morning and went for a run. Afterward as I was cooling down I saw my neighbor walking his dog.

Here's how he does it. He sits behind the wheel of his car smoking a butt and drives along the shoulder of the road about fifteen miles an hour. His dog, a black Lab, runs alongside. If the dog lags, my neighbor blows his horn to hurry him up.

The dog always appears anxious, as if afraid of being abandoned on the highway. And eager to please his master, he keeps running until he's exhausted.

The guy drives a muscle car and has an enormous gut because he drives everywhere, never walks. I once saw him drive to the mailbox, three doors down, and then back home. I figure he has a little electric car in his house to get from room to room.

After breakfast I called Glenn Roderick, who covers the arts and entertainment scene for the local rag. He told me that the leader of Rath was named Howard Neff, a.k.a. Stik. He also said that the group was considered cutting edge only by brain-dead twenty-somethings, that post punk suggested nothing to him but wood rot, and that the last

good rock band was Buffalo Springfield, which, I guess, is why he now covers jazz and symphonic music.

I got the top down on the Ford, put on a Coltrane tape, and headed across town to the Cranberry Krockpot where, Bud Swinney had told me, I could see Chandra Bahadur.

It was the midmorning lull, and the diner was empty. The counterman slouched on a stool with a cup of coffee. I asked for Bahadur. He looked me up and down as if he'd just discovered a maggot in the rice. Rolled the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other. Sneered. Jerked a thumb.

"He's probably sleeping in the linen closet. You from immigration?"

I started toward the back, following the thumb.

"You find that lazy bastard, tell him I said to get to work on those garbage cans."

Bahadur was in the alley, furiously scrubbing the last of a dozen barrels. He was a slight man in his early twenties with one of the most infectious smiles I have ever encountered. The smile was offset somewhat by several bruises and two black eyes, now yellowing.

He acknowledged having talked to Ray and then proceeded to describe his attackers as "very very large, like Hulk Hogan." Patting his ribs gently he added, "They crack bones here, give me black eyes, call me names." He smiled broadly. "Better now. Mr. Swin-



ney pays for doctor. He says police will get these men." He could add nothing useful to his description: his attackers had waylaid him at night and had worn masks.

I felt the anger rising, anger at the kind of people who would beat a small gentle man for no reason other than his appearance, or because he held a job that none of them would probably even apply for.

Trang, who worked at the Kape Kod Kleen Klothes Korner, could tell me even less. He'd seen a dark pickup truck as it side-swiped him, then the chain link fence that he'd plowed into.

The Senegalese had left town.

I decided to visit Waxman's porn emporium.

Bernie Waxman had painted his store windows white. A single sign read A-1 ADULT VIDEO AND BOOKS. Someone had spraypainted the word SIN in huge letters across the brick wall between the windows, whether as an injunction or a suggestion I couldn't tell.

A couple of furtive men and one woman, smartly dressed in a business suit, inspected the films. Waxman had an area stocked with autoerotic devices including inflatable dolls sporting what appeared to be red tinsel wigs. I tried to imagine the withered souls desperate enough to turn to these rubberoid grotesqueries for comfort, but it was too depressing. I approached the counter-man and asked for Waxman.

"Who's askin'?" grunted the hominid, lowering his comic book. His hair appeared to have been styled by a blind man using a weed whacker.

"Stubblefield."

He picked up the phone and hit a button.

"Some guy name of Stumblefield wants to see you. Okay." He replaced the receiver. "Boss says you wait here."

Half a minute later Waxman appeared. He was tall, well-built, and sported a very expensive suit with a faint bulge under the left shoulder.

"Some identification if you don't mind."

I produced my license. Waxman looked it over, nodded toward his office.

After the showroom the office was striking in its normality. Not a whip or a handcuff in sight, just some legal texts and a copy of *Forbes*.

"Swinney said you'd be by. Let's keep this simple. Find out who did this, and then shoot their asses."

"We don't do that any more. We apprehend them, incarcerate them, and attempt to rehabilitate them. Shooting is out. Sorry."

Waxman snorted. "Right. So apprehend them and give them thirty days in the electric chair. That will rehabilitate the bastards."

He sat down on the corner of his desk. "Now look: I don't like threatening phone calls, and I really don't like firebombs in my

place of business. So I ask around and I hear that maybe the goddamn skinheads are responsible."

"I didn't know there were any skinheads out here."

"It's a new thing apparently, but already they're painting swastikas and the like—on my synagogue for one—and beating up anyone who doesn't look like Robert Redford." He eyed the TV screens monitoring the interior of the store. It was empty now.

"I told Chambers all this last week. Now he's dead—a black detective nosing around those Aryan yahoos. You figure it out."

"Did Ray tell you anything?"

"No, but when I mentioned skinheads, a lightbulb clicked on, you know?" He got up. Interview over. I thanked him and went out to the car, leaving the clerk to the inflatables and his *Spider-man* comic.

It was noon and I was hungry, so I drove to The Rudder. Floyd had added some health food dishes to the menu, and I meant to give them a try.

I grabbed a corner booth. Floyd strolled over and sat down, and a minute later Pete Sugarman, an attorney with human services, joined us. I'm usually particular about who I sit with, especially where attorneys are concerned, but Pete works for a fraction of what he could make in private practice, removing children from abusive homes. Which makes him okay by me.

I ordered the Southwest Veg-

gieburger. It looked and tasted like boiled cardboard soaked in Swedish salsa.

"Mind if I smoke?" asked Pete, slotting a fresh cigarette.

"Yeah," I said. "I mind. Cigarette smoke ruins my dining experience."

Pete eyed the Veggieburger.

"The hell with that. Watching you eat that mess would ruin my smoking experience."

I sampled the brown rice. It was gummy and devoid of flavor.

"You know what the penalty was for smoking in Muscovy three hundred years ago, Pete? They took away your pipe and rammed the stem up through your nose and into your brain. Sort of adds a new dimension to the expression 'getting smoked,' doesn't it?"

He pocketed the cigarette. "Okay. I get the point." He took a toothpick and began chewing furiously at it.

"How's the Veggieburger?" asked Floyd.

"Amazing the uses they've found for Styrofoam," I replied. He looked hurt.

"Health food takes some getting used to is all."

"So did the rack, I hear," said Pete.

"I'm just trying to do my part, looking out for my customers' well-being. Too much red meat is bad for you."

"Hell, Floyd. You don't even have a nonsmoking section. The British railways had smoke-free coaches over a century ago." I signaled the waitress.

"Bring me a bacon cheeseburger and some fried onion rings, please."

Pete fired up his cigarette and inhaled deeply.

"I'll smoke to that."

I went back to the office and pulled Ray's contracts out of the drawer. None of them raised a red flag, and I put them away again. Then I got my feet up on the windowsill and watched the gulls ride the thermals.

Downstairs in the music store someone was torturing a violin. I couldn't imagine how only four fingers and four strings could conspire to make so many mistakes, or how Emilio could stand giving lessons to maladroït, hammer-handed children.

On the other hand, Emilio drives a late-model Buick and owns a home in Harwichport. He probably doesn't eat at The Rudder, either.

When the violinist began dismembering "Aunt Rhody," I hit the street. I needed to know something about the skinheads, and if anyone outside of police headquarters could tell me, it would be Ricky Tan.

Ricky waved me in, disappeared into his kitchen, and came back carrying a couple of Bass ales. Ricky holds the unique position of columnist at large for the local paper, which means that he writes about anything that interests him. What interests him is idiosyncrasy, politics, and the underworld.

Painted on his floor is a large compass rose with little lines marking all three hundred sixty degrees. Ricky has aligned all his furniture according to the compass. Every so often he moves everything a degree or two in one direction, to adjust, so he says, for the local yearly variation in magnetic north.

I have no idea what compels him to do this or where he's steering his ship, but geomancy makes just as much sense, I suppose, as the more traditional rudders people use to get themselves through the day.

"Sure," he said when I'd asked my question. He scribbled on a pad and handed it to me:

SHÜKK

"Stands for Skinheads of Cape Cod. I suspect they use K's instead of C's because of the resonance with the Klan. The lighting bolts, of course, denote an emotional attachment to Hitler's SS. They have liaison with both groups, by the way, the Klan and the neo-Nazis."

"Nice bunch of lads."

"Like a piranha in your bathtub."

"Tell me about them."

"This have to do with Ray?"

"It could."

"Well, step lightly, Charles. These guys are very hostile, very volatile." He set his bottle down carefully on the *E* for east. "And then there's Malcolm."

"Who's Malcolm?"

"The head of the snake, if you

will. He owns a health club over in Mashpee. He's a guru to the muscle crowd; which includes the people you're looking at."

"And, obviously, that you've been looking at."

"True. I'm always interested in pathology, but this is one story I probably won't publish."

"Why not? You've gone after some pretty big game."

He settled back in his chair. "I'll tell you a couple of stories about Malcolm. He's a muscle freak, looks inhuman in a bathing suit. An enormous sculpted mass of muscle, sinew, and scar tissue. He worships Milo, the god of strength. Has a little altar with a bronze statue of him."

"One night, according to a guy I know, Malcolm and one of his proteges get on a subway up in Boston. The car is full of bad boys. One's playing a boom box really loud. Malcolm tells him to turn it down. The guy tells Malcolm to shove it. Malcolm grabs the radio, smashes it to pieces over his own head, then proceeds to announce that anyone he doesn't personally know had better exit the car in ten seconds. Or else."

"What happened?"

"They jumped him."

"And?"

"According to my friend, Malcolm and his buddy worked their way from one end of the car to the other, and when they got there they were the only ones standing. The cops are still laughing about it."

"Another time: he's in Boston

again. On Mass. Ave. He looks across the street and spots five large guys with clubs chasing another guy down the sidewalk. Malcolm sees an injustice. He implores Milo to give him strength. Then he goes over and around traffic, takes out all five guys. Bam, like that. Then the victim runs up. 'What are you doing?' he says, horrified. Turns out it's a fraternity hazing, the clubs are paddles."

"What did he do?"

"He was so torqued off he punched the kid out."

Ricky drained his ale and blew a glassy note across the rim.

"There's more. Malcolm's a patriot. Capital P. Thinks society is rotting from within: welfare, draft dodgers, a Jewish conspiracy, immigrants—especially immigrants."

"He forgot politicians. You talk national rot, you have to talk politicians."

"You've got something there. But here's the deal: Malcolm's grandparents were themselves immigrants, from somewhere in Eastern Europe. Last name has ten letters, only one vowel, and that vowel is a 'y.' Malcolm avoided the draft because his eyes are bad. And he changed his last name to Brittain. The man's an incredible hypocrite."

"Don't hold back," I said. "Tell me the bad stuff."

Ricky grinned. "He's a piece of work, all right. Got it all tied up like this: strong body, strong mind, strong patriotic values equal national purity."

"Sounds depressingly familiar."

"*Ya wohl.* And he's involved in community outreach, old Malcolm is. When the college newspaper got thrown off campus for race-baiting and anti-Semitic content, Malcolm set them up somewhere and contributed money. Otherwise they probably would've gone under." He glanced at the compass rose, adjusted the position of the coffee table by an imperceptible amount.

"You got any names?" I asked.

"One. Malcolm's right-hand man is a headbanger name of Neff. Howard Neff."

The Star Athletic Club was a squat one story cinder block affair at the end of a strip mall. I parked and went in.

Despite its outward appearance the club was well-equipped and brightly lit. To the right, people dressed in designer athletic wear labored on treadmills and rowing machines. On the left was basic gym: several weight machines and a great many free-standing weights. Large men grunted and sweated over sets of curls, squats, and bench presses. One of them spotted me and lumbered over. "Help you?"

"What's the daily fee?"

He shook his head. "Members only." Over his shoulder I saw a couple of familiar faces: Howard Neff and his bass player Isaac. Isaac spotted me. His eyes widened in an expression of genuine fear. Neff saw me, too, and walked right over.

"Don't tell me," he sneered. "You're thinking of opening a gym down in Fall River."

"You know this guy?" said the other.

"He's a cop," said Neff. His companion stepped back. "Naw, not a real cop. A private snooper. Throw him out."

The first man smiled, put a beefy hand on my chest, and pushed. I grabbed his hand and twisted, bending the fingers back toward the elbow, and kicked his feet out from under him. As he hit the floor, I rolled him onto his face and put pressure on the wristlock. He croaked in pain, and Neff closed in.

"Back off or I'll ruin him," I said, pressing harder.

"Oh Jesus, my arm! Do what he says, Howie! Jesus!"

Neff stopped, eyes narrowed, fists clenched.

"Nice way to greet a prospective member, Howie."

"You go to hell, pal!" The cords in his neck were standing proud, and he was trembling with barely controlled rage. All activity in the gym ceased.

"Go get the owner."

"He's not here."

I looked at the figure on the floor and applied a little torque to his wrist.

"Is that true?"

"He's not here, man, he's not here!"

"Okay. You give him a message, Howie. Tell him his staff is shy a few manners: I may have to write the Better Business Bureau. And tell him I'll be back for

a little talk about morons who play with matches and breathe heavy on the phone."

All at once Neff relaxed and began to laugh. It wasn't a pleasant thing to hear.

"Man, you got a death wish. Come back anytime, you poor stupid bastard." With that he went back to the weight room, his harsh laughter echoing off the concrete walls.

Dr. Parnell Haber was chairman of the history department at the college. Ricky Tan had suggested Haber as a source of information on fringe groups. The professor had agreed to see me before his morning classes.

"There's nothing new under the sun, Mr. Stubblefield, if you'll excuse the employment of a truism." He riffled the pages of a book, found what he sought, and read aloud. "'Our mission is to restore America to the Americans, to purify and strengthen this nation—to keep it clean from corruption.'" He snapped the book shut. "That was written almost one hundred and fifty years ago by the Order of the Star Spangled Banner or, as you probably know them, the Know Nothings."

Of the Know Nothings I knew nothing and said so.

"Quite powerful in the pre-Civil War years. They weren't the first, of course. Anti-Catholicism came over with the colonists and was quite virulent here in Massachusetts. The nativist impulse informed many subsequent move-

ments: the American Protective Association, the Klan, the Red Scare, and so on right up to today's militias, skinheads, and so forth. The regenerative worm in the American apple if you will."

"Societies of hate," I offered.

"Societies of fear, rather," said Haber, removing his glasses and kneading the base of his nose. He replaced the glasses and reached for another book. "Or as David Bennett calls them, *The Party of Fear*. I recommend his book if you really seek insight into the historical development of nativism."

"What kind of people join these groups?"

"Well, Richard Hofstadter described them as 'overheated, over-suspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic.' Bennett points out that their paranoia often springs from a sense of powerlessness. Thus it's not just that they instill fear in others, but that they themselves are fearful of a world in which they wield little power or influence."

He replaced the book and checked his watch.

"The skinheads, in general, are not sophisticated. They bear a special animus toward immigrants, reacting viscerally to a perceived loss of jobs, for example, or from simple, straightforward racism." He eyed me across the cluttered desk.

"Not sophisticated, as I say, but easily manipulated and often quite dangerous."

Isaac was waiting at the office



when I got back. He was clearly nervous.

"Look, I'm not here, okay?"

"Talk to me, Isaac."

"You've got to back off. You're messing around with the wrong people."

"It seems to me that it's you associating with the wrong people."

"I don't have any choice. Look, I auditioned for Rath last month, and Howie hired me. I've got a lot of bills to pay, what with college and all. I'm studying music, so I figured why not make some extra money playing. I'm not big on rock—I want to play jazz—but a gig's a gig."

"Everything was going along okay, and Stik—that's Howie—got me to come to the gym and taught me how to lift weights." He held his arms out from his spare frame. "Pathetic, huh?"

"You don't need a ninety inch chest to play the bass."

"I don't want to look like those guys. I just don't want to look like an X-ray. Anyway, Malcolm's right: life is like weightlifting. You've got to have a good foundation to succeed at both. You seen him?"

"No."

"He's got muscles in places most people don't even have places. I've seen him dead lift eight hundred pounds, bench press five and a quarter, no problem. We're talking *strong*."

"There are different kinds of strength. Muscle mass is just one, and not the most important."

He looked me up and down. "Excuse me for saying so, but if

you get in Malcolm's way, he'll fold you up and slam dunk you. He's got a real short fuse."

"How did Neff know I was a detective?"

"Because Chambers came around asking questions and then you did the same. Christ, you told Stik that Chambers was your partner." He sighed and rubbed his face. "I think they killed him."

"Why do you think that?"

"They were upset when they saw me talking to him at the club. Stik wanted to know what he was asking about. I told him Chambers was a musician looking for work, which is what he told me. He also asked about the band's politics, which I thought was kind of strange. Anyway, we had to get back on stage and that's the last I saw of the guy. I didn't give it any more thought until Stik had me call him up."

"You called Ray?"

"Yeah. Stik said there was some kind of misunderstanding and he wanted to get it straightened out. He asked if I'd set up a meet with Chambers down by the Ocean Street docks, sort of act as a go-between. What the hell, I said, sure. But then Stik tells me he'll meet the guy alone. Next day it's in the papers. Mind if I smoke?"

"Sorry. This is a smoke-free zone."

Isaac shrugged, put the pack away.

"In the gym next day, Stik takes me aside and tells me to forget I ever called Chambers. I was real-

ly scared and asked him what was going on.

"He said that he talked with Chambers and got everything squared away. Somebody killed him after that, according to Stik. But if it gets out that we even talked to him, we'll be suspects. I'll be considered a possible accomplice to murder, even though we didn't do anything."

I must have looked skeptical.

"Yeah, it sounded pretty thin to me, too, but what was I supposed to do?"

"Go to the cops. We're talking about murder here."

"Jesus, you don't know these guys. Stik, his friends—they're bad news. I wish I'd never met any of them. I'm scared, man. If they suspect that I've talked to you, I'm as good as dead. After you showed up at the gym yesterday, they're suspicious of me. I can see it."

"You heard of SHOKK?"

"No. What is it, a band?"

"Skinheads of Cape Cod."

"Howie?"

I nodded.

"Malcolm?"

"He employs them for dirty work from time to time. I figure they checked up on Ray, determined that he was a detective, and they, or Malcolm, decided he had to go."

"Oh man, what am I going to do?"

"Just carry on with your routine. This will be over soon."

It was Isaac's turn to look skeptical. I couldn't blame him. He was over his head in trouble,

and I didn't have a plan to speak of. I was certain that Malcolm and Neff were responsible for Ray's murder, and I was going to confront them with it.

For that I would need help.

"Skinheads," said Willy Kim, removing his bag gloves. He had been hitting the speed bag with such rapidity that the rhythmic tattoo blurred into one continuous sound.

Except for us and the morning sunlight spilling through the windows, the dojo was empty.

Willy is a tae kwon do master. His classes are small and likely to remain that way since he refuses to water down the martial arts for American consumers. He is taciturn, uncompromising, and when conditions warrant it fierce.

"This actually a paying job?"

I nodded.

"How many?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe four, probably more. Don't have time for a head count. I'm pretty sure they killed Ray."

"When?"

"Tonight. The gym closes at eight. Isaac says that Malcolm and his boys work out then."

"What's the plan?"

"Well, I thought maybe you'd dazzle them with some Confucianism. You know: 'The superior man acts before he speaks, and afterwards speaks according to his actions.'"

"Sorry. I'm Korean. Can't help you with Confucius."

"Then maybe you can keep the

other steroid cases off me while I have a chat with Malcolm."

"A chat?"

"Okay, I'm going to tear his goddamn head off if I can."

"Weapons?"

"No. We'll be in enough trouble with the law as it is. Besides, they'll be in their shorts. No place to hide guns."

Willy shrugged. "Your call."

"Anyway, there are only six or eight of them. There are two of us."

At eight thirty Willy banged on the door of the Star Athletic Club. It flew open to reveal a disgruntled young man wearing sweats and a broad leather weightlifting belt. "What the hell is it?" he snarled. "We're closed."

Willy smiled brightly. "Welcome Wagon." He grabbed the belt and sent the lifter hurtling headfirst into the parking lot. We went in and locked the door behind us.

There were five people at the far end of the gym. One of them was Isaac. He was sitting on the floor, propped against the wall. Judging from the condition of his face, he had recently been used as a punching bag.

"Well, well," sneered Howard Neff. "I didn't think you'd actually be stupid enough to come back." He turned to the man next to him. "Chambers' partner."

I saw now what Ricky Tan had meant when he said that Malcolm looked inhuman. His arms and thighs were enormous, bulging, and veined, each bicep

as big as a normal man's thigh, each thigh as big as my waist. The latissimi dorsi muscles flared out from mid-back to shoulders like bat wings. Abdominal muscles stood out in sharp relief, each distinct from the others.

In comparison to his body, Malcolm's head was almost comically small and jug-eared. His baldness and a pair of glasses only accentuated the disparity. Baby blue eyes rolled around like magnified marbles behind the thick lenses. He approached us with that rolling gait not uncommon in body builders.

"Well, well. The race traitor and his little friend the slope. We were just asking Isaac about you." He talked like Yogi Berra's diction coach and had breath fetid enough to reach me six feet away.

"What are you guys doing?" asked Willy, looking around. "Training for the Special Olympics?"

Pointing at Willy, Malcolm said, "Howard, did anyone call for take-out?"

Neff laughed. "Naw. No one."

"Then kindly remove the trash."

In a soft voice Willy said, "Why don't you do it yourself, freak?"

Neff advanced in a boxing stance. "I'm going to rip your spine out, Mr. Moto. And I'm going to enjoy doing it."

He lunged, throwing a straight right on the way in.

Willy slapped the punch aside and hit Neff three times in the face, his fists a blur. As Neff recoiled, Willy whipped a round-

house kick to his temple, dropping him to the floor where he remained, motionless.

Willy faced the other two who, despite their size, were clearly sobered by the rapid demise of their comrade.

"It's you and me, Malcolm," I said. "You sent these pathetic creeps over to Swinney's and then to Waxman's. You also had Ray Chambers killed. You're a racist, an arsonist, a murderer, and you're so ugly that when you were born the doctor slapped your mama."

Malcolm's face became the color of boiled ham. A vein in his forehead pulsed so hard I thought it might burst. He glared steadily at me through the soda-bottle-thick lenses.

"I told Howard to scare the schwärze off, not kill him. But he does tend to be extreme sometimes. No matter. One less of the mud people. You: you are just as bad. Worse. You watch the corruption of your own country and you do nothing. But here you are. You break into my place of business, you assault my employees, you threaten me with physical harm. When the police come, I tell them that you killed Isaac, and then I was forced to kill both of you in self-defense. I'll start with you."

He circled me in a crouch, arms parallel to the floor. I'd have to end this quickly. If Malcolm got hold of me, I'd be in serious trouble. He was certainly powerful enough to dismember or crush me.

He came in low, looking for my

legs. I sidestepped and chopped down with my elbow on the back of his neck. No good. He whirled and came at me high. Again I ducked, this time slamming a ridge hand against the base of his nose. His head snapped back, and his glasses flew to the floor. He groped for them, and I used the opportunity to piston two blows to his kidneys with all the strength I could muster.

Malcolm stumbled forward, bellowing in pain, but he had the glasses. He put them on, then snatched a forty pound dumbbell from the rack and threw it at me. I hadn't expected it and wouldn't have thought anyone, even Malcolm, strong enough to do such a thing. One end of the dumbbell caught the point of my left shoulder. The pain was stunning. I tried to move the arm and found that I couldn't.

Malcolm charged, screaming, spittle flying, hands reaching for my neck.

I could attempt a scissors strike to break his arm, but his musculature was so great that it might not succeed. Besides, my damaged left arm precluded it. His chin was tucked, protecting his throat. A strike to the groin or solar plexus was problematic: if either failed, he'd be on me.

He was too strong. I needed an edge. Where could I hurt him? And then I saw it. I sidestepped him yet again and kicked to the back of his head as he went by. It had the desired effect: his glasses flew off again, only this time I beat him to them and smashed

them underfoot. While he stood blinking, I sent a roundhouse kick to the side of his neck.

He dropped to one knee and started to get up again. I drove a sidekick between his eyes. He toppled over backwards, blood gushing from his ruined nose.

Both kicks had landed with devastating force, yet he struggled to his feet and stood unsteadily, squinting at me through eyes that were already turning black. The man was tough, if stupid.

I ran at him and jumped: yoko tobi geri. Flying sidekick to the solar plexus. He crashed back into a treadmill, the air whooshing out of him, and it was over. He lay doubled up, fighting for breath, while the treadmill, activated by the encounter, whirled gently on its way to nowhere.

Swinney and Waxman are happy, but nobody else is.

Malcolm is pressing charges: trespass, assault and battery, attempted murder. Eddie Olivera is furious at me for interfering in a murder investigation. Before he threw me out of his office, he promised to yank my license.

On the other hand, Malcolm and Howard Neff are going to stand trial for murdering Ray. With Isaac's testimony, in ex-

change for immunity, the D.A. has at least a fighting chance.

The unkindest cut came from Willy Kim.

We had just finished working out and were cooling down when he told me of his displeasure.

"Sloppy."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You were sloppy. Took too much time with Malcolm."

"Come on! The guy's virtually indestructible. Besides, I only had one arm."

Willy wagged a forefinger at me. "No excuses. You are trained. He is not. Old saying: 'There should never be more than three blows thrown in a violent encounter. An opponent is permitted to strike once, sometimes twice, but the third blow is always thrown by the kung fu man.'"

"Who said that?"

Willy shrugged. "Anonymous."

"Try this on, then," I said, bowing formally. "The superior man is distressed by his want of ability."

Willy rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me: Confucius again."

"Yep."

"Well, want of ability we can do something about." He threw down his towel and stepped to the center of the dojo floor.

"Right this way, my friend."

FICTION

# EMERALD EYES



Gary Alexander

Illustration by James Moir

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/99

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At a park in the city of Mérida, Yucatán State, Mexico, Luis Balam gazed absently at a statue of the Boy Heroes of Chapultepec. One and a half centuries earlier, at the close of what *norteamericanos* called the Mexican War, these six military cadets had leaped to their deaths from Mexico City's Chapultepec Castle rather than surrender to the conquering Americans.

More accurately, Luis was gazing through the bronze thicket of heroic jaw-sets and rifle barrels. It was eleven o'clock in the evening, and he was looking a block beyond, at a hotel window. Just then the woman renting the room turned off the light. Luis went to his car to wait.

Luis Balam was a detective, not a voyeur. He had spent the last two days monitoring the woman's every activity outside her room. At night he slept in his battered Volkswagen Beetle in the hotel lot. The daily parking charge was the equivalent of one dollar U.S.; twice that for the attendant not to notice Luis curled up in the back seat. Tomorrow this assignment would be finished, and none too soon.

Luis's client was a Cancún City attorney by the name of Ricardo Martinez Rodriguez. Ricky was not generous with expense money, and Luis could not afford a hotel, let alone this one. The woman was paying in excess of fifty dollars U.S. per night, cheap by Cancún standards but to Luis an impossible extravagance.

The woman's name was Anna Tynker, and she was on a three-day holiday. According to Ricky, his client was Anna's husband, a rich North American writer of books. Ricky had instructed Luis to be on the alert for "liaisons" and to protect her from petty crime if necessary.

Luis had detected no liaisons, no petty crime. Anna Tynker's routine was dull and predictable. During the day she remained in her room or wandered the downtown streets alone, sightseeing and shopping. Her nightly pattern was also constant. She had no visitors, and between ten thirty and eleven fifteen her lights went out. It seemed as if she had chosen Mérida strictly as a venue in which to lose herself in thought.

Luis needed to be sure she stayed put. He slumped behind the wheel, since an Indian idling on the street at this hour attracted suspicion. He figured on giving her twenty minutes but sat up with a start when he saw her walk out the main door and down the steps.

Anna Tynker was a white woman in her thirties who wore expensive running shoes, a plain cotton dress, rimless eyeglasses in front of vivid green eyes, and long brown hair parted down the middle. She was roughly Luis's height: five foot three. Slung on her shoulder by a strap was a cloth handbag.

Luis regarded her as mildly pretty. During his surveillance, he had seen a hundred men look

at her, fifty of them smile, and ten attempt a conversation. She had given none of them the slightest encouragement.

Tonight, however, she was not alone.

She was a bit unsteady, and her heel slipped on a step. The man at her side caught her before she fell, cupping her elbow. Anna Tynker took back her elbow quickly and without a thank you.

Luis recognized the man but couldn't immediately place him. He loomed over her, five years older, heavy-hipped, ruddy in the cheeks, pink and hairy elsewhere. He was the Anglo tourist who should never wear shorts and a sleeveless top but invariably did.

The man reached into plaid Bermuda shorts for a pack of cigarettes and lit up. Then Luis remembered. He was a hotel guest, a French tourist. Earlier today Luis had boldly followed Anna Tynker into the hotel and up in the elevator, curious about whether she might have a lover in a different room. She hadn't, but the Frenchman was in the elevator on the way down, smoking a cigarette, arrogantly ignoring the objections of fellow riders.

Luis maintained an interval that barely kept them in view. There were no crowds to blend into. One block north of the park the couple went into a side street. The railway station was a block beyond.

Luis was puzzled. Anna Tynker had taken a first-class bus from Cancún. Now she was de-

parting, with just a portion of her belongings, a day early by train with a man she obviously disliked.

The street was dark and deserted, the single street lamp burned out. The couple was gone. At their pace they hadn't had time to reach the station. Luis walked slowly along a sidewalk, seeing and hearing nothing.

Halfway down the block he saw a cigarette smoldering in the street. Luis crept ahead on his toes. In the next doorway were two low voices, one male and guttural and threatening, the other female and choking and pleading.

Luis stepped into the doorway thinking rape, but the man's hands were on her throat, not inside her dress. Luis grabbed his shirt and hair and wrenched him loose. He kicked the Frenchman's legs out from under him and sent him down hard on his butt.

Anna's bag fell. Sobbing and coughing, she dropped to her knees to pick up something that had spilled and scattered. The Frenchman sprang to his feet, surprisingly agile for his size.

"Take it easy, boss," Luis said as he backpedaled. "Nobody has gotten hurt bad yet."

The Frenchman's palms were flattened, and he had assumed a martial arts stance. He kept advancing, sneering, feinting left, then right, testing Luis's reflexes. Luis flicked off his sandals for better traction.

The sneer told Luis that the

Frenchman had evaluated his foe. He had evaluated a thirty-seven-year-old Yucatec Maya in dark slacks, white shirt, and sandals. The ordinary dress of an ordinary Indian, nobody important. A random meddler who was going to be sorry. He had evaluated a round face, prominent cheekbones, aquiline nose, and almond eyes brought across the Bering land bridge thirty millennia ago. He had perhaps not evaluated stockiness without fat and a deceptive musculature.

"Hyeeah!" he howled, the noise karate experts make to terrify their victims.

Luis dodged a deadly kick, ducked an equally lethal arm thrust, and broke the Frenchman's nose with a fist. He dropped to his knees and rolled on one side, groaning.

Anna Tynker booted him in the ribs, screaming, "You bastard. You were paid to kill me, weren't you?"

Luis picked up his sandals and a small, shiny stone where Anna's bag had fallen. He looked at the Frenchman, who had risen to a knee, spitting blood.

"Come on," he told her. "He still might."

**T**hey couldn't go to her hotel and Luis had nowhere to go, so he took her to a neighborhood bar he had found, El Gato Negro. The Black Cat had swinging wooden doors, a black and white TV tuned to a boxing match, bottles of caustic liquors turned up-

side down in dispensers above the backbar, and customers who appeared to live there.

Anna Tynker said, "I had a couple of frozen strawberry daiquiris earlier for courage. I don't suppose they do them here. If not, beer's fine."

Luis smiled, ordered two bottles of Leon Negra, a Mérida product and his favorite brew. He didn't object when Anna paid.

"Finally I have a chance to thank you," she said, clasping his hands. "Who are you?"

"Luis Balam."

"That's your name. Who are you?"

"Somebody taking a walk."

"I rarely forget a face. Weren't you in the hotel elevator with me yesterday?"

She had him, but Luis was going to make her work for it. "How long have you known the Frenchman?"

"How did you know he was French?"

"Not even a Texan would smoke in an elevator."

Anna Tynker laughed. "Did Doyle hire you to follow me?"

"I know no Doyle."

"Don't play innocent. Who hired you if my husband didn't?"

"Is he a North American book writer?"

"Yes. Have you read *Good, Better, Best: You Are Your Own Limit?* Or *Spheres of Influence: No Man Is an Archipelago?*"

"No."

"Can't blame you, though everyone north of the border has. Those were Dr. Doyle's monster

bestsellers. His last two nose-dived. Even the faithful can take only so much pap. He delivered another manuscript before we came to Cancún. His agent won't return his calls."

"He is a doctor?"

"A pop psychologist with a New Age spin. Doyle Tynker, Ph.D., on his book jackets. Did he hire you?"

"Bestsellers," Luis said. "*Jona-  
than Livingston Seagull.*"

"What?"

"Bestselling books of 1972-1973. I worked construction at Cancún when it was first being built. North American contractor friends helped me to speak their language. I learned to read English studying the 1974 *World Almanac.*"

"You learned well. Did Doyle hire you?"

"He is a client of a lawyer friend."

"You're a private detective?"

"At times."

"What were your instructions?"

"To watch for liaisons. Was the Frenchman a liaison?"

"Did you notice any sex?" Anna asked sarcastically, rubbing her neck, which was wine-red and raw. "All I noticed was violence."

"I noticed you walk out into a dark night with him."

"What does that prove?"

"You accused him of being hired to kill you. Was he escorting you to the station? I do not think trains run from Mérida at night, and there is no railroad to Cancún."

"I don't mean to be ungrateful,

but frankly, some things are none of your business."

"Things that are not liaisons?"

She drank her beer from the bottle. "It's very complicated."

Luis took the stone from his shirt and held it up to the light. "Green. Same color as your eyes."

Anna Tynker nearly toppled her beer grabbing Luis's arm. "Jesus, c'mon, don't."

Luis closed his hand on it. "Emerald?"

"Yes, and it's mine."

He repocketed the stone. "A good reason for murder. Can't judge the color in here, but it is uncut and at least one carat. In emeralds, color is everything. How many more of these do you have?"

"How does a detective know so much about gemstones?"

"My two daughters and I own a shop on the Caribbean coastal highway an hour south of Cancún. We call it Black Coral. We sell the namesake along with lapis lazuli and rose quartz and other semiprecious stones. Many of our pieces are set in silver. Come by. I will make you a deal on a necklace or a bracelet. Cheap, almost free."

"Do you handle emeralds?"

"No. My customers are tourists who get off buses and spend the few dollars they haven't already spent in Cancún."

"But do you understand the trade?"

Luis nodded. "The best emeralds are Colombian. More leave the country illegally than legally. Many come up through Belize,

through Yucatán, and on to North America and Europe. Jewelers buy them and avoid taxes and duties."

"Very good."

"You and Dr. Tynker are smugglers?"

She sighed and drank her beer and studied the bottle. Luis didn't hurry her. "Doyle met some Belizeans. We're overextended, and nobody buys his stupid books any more. This was to be our first and last sale."

"You give the Frenchman emeralds, he gives you money?"

"That was the plan. Doyle told me to stand by. When the Frenchman contacted me, I was to cooperate. He introduced himself as André Lupien, a representative of a Paris jeweler. He said to walk with him to the railway station. We'd have privacy for the swap. He was catching a train to Mexico City. I should've smelled a rat."

"Killing you was not part of the plan."

Anna Tynker forced a smile. "So I thought."

"But you believe he was just going to kill you. Never mind the emeralds."

"If he was going to doublecross us and take the stones, he could have done that without killing me. Also, Luis, his hands went right for my neck. He didn't even confirm that I had the emeralds with me."

"How many do you have?"

"Thirty. Some a little smaller than the stone you have. Some go up to two carats."

"Worth plenty of money," Luis said. "Who do you think hired him to kill you?"

"Dr. Doyle, the scumbag creep."

"You do not like each other."

"That's the understatement of the year. I've asked for a divorce as soon as we go home next week. He drew me into this mess with the promise that the profit would go into my end of the settlement."

"Did he behave calmly when you asked for the divorce?"

"Oh yes. Dr. Doyle has written entire chapters on boy-girl civility."

"Something puzzles me: Why was I hired to interfere with your privacy and the Frenchman's?"

"Damn good question. What do we do?"

"Sleep."

"Where are you staying?"

"In my car. You can have the back seat."

"Makes sense to me. Lupien could have friends. They might be checking the hotels."

Luis drove to an unattended parking lot. Curled up in the rear Anna said, "Pleasant dreams."

Luis had no dreams, pleasant or otherwise. It was not the battle with the steering wheel for space that prevented sleep. It was this case. His jobs for Ricky Martinez usually involved catching stupid people doing stupid things. Easy.

This assignment, on the other hand, was a mass of contradictions and lies and greed, a mystery. A mystery was a headache, and Anna Tynker's mystery pro-

longed his headache throughout the night.

**T**hey awakened to church bells. Anna said her mouth tasted awful and asked where they could clean up. Luis was more concerned with having a look at his emerald in the daylight before commuters came into the lot.

"Glass," he said, squinting.

She took it from him. "You have to be kidding."

"No. This is a chunk from a soda bottle tumbled in a lapidary drum."

Anna went into her handbag and sprinkled green stones from a leather pouch into Luis's hand.

"Same," he said, examining them one by one.

"Swell. If Lupien played it straight and swapped cash for emeralds and looked them over, he'd try to kill me. Without you, I'm dead either way."

"But he tried to kill you first."

"Don't remind me."

Anna angrily flung the fake emeralds. They landed on a tin roof and rattled off.

"Sounds like hail."

Luis did not know what hail was and didn't reply. He squeezed out some of his toothpaste for her, and she brushed with a finger. Cleaning up remained a problem. Luis had bribed a maid at Anna's hotel for ten minutes' use of the bath in a vacant room, but of course this was not possible now.

Mérida was Yucatán's major

city, with the population of Kansas City or Seattle. It sprawled low to the ground, punctuated with eruptions of massive cathedrals. Its core was European colonial dotted with leafy plazas.

They ate breakfast at an open-air café adjacent to a downtown park. Luis had rice and black beans. Anna Tynker ate a stack of hotcakes, which Luis regarded as flavorless Anglo tortillas. Afterward they drank coffee and discussed her predicament.

"I can't stay in Mérida forever," she said. "Nor am I keen on going back to Cancún when I'm supposed to be dead."

"If the emerald smuggling is not real, how does Doyle profit by killing you?"

"Other than saving on the property settlement, I imagine he has life insurance policies I know nothing about."

Luis gazed out at the choking morning traffic and the plaza just beyond. Pigeons were perched on a statue, defiling a dead politician.

He said, "Your husband will be awaiting a report from Lupien."

"Lupien won't have good news, so he may not report at all. Or Lupien tries to collect before Doyle learns he failed."

"Or Lupien believed emeralds were to be his payment for murder. Kill you, then take your bag."

"Which means Dr. Doyle may send somebody else after me."

"Perhaps we can lure Dr. Tynker to you."

"How?"





"Ricky Martinez."

"Your lawyer client. That's an idea. Let's call him."

"He has no phone."

"No fax or e-mail, naturally. Can we get a message to him to drive here and meet us?"

Luis shook his head. "He does not own a car."

"Where's his office?"

"In Cancún City. His office is above a bar. You have to walk up outside steps."

"He doesn't sound especially prosperous. Is he reputable?"

Luis shrugged. "Sometimes."

"So how do we reach him?"

"First, another question. Are there Belizean smugglers and genuine emeralds in your lives?"

"Or was it all just an elaborate scheme by Dr. Doyle to have me killed in a doorway far away from him, so he'd have an alibi? I don't know, Luis."

Luis shrugged again. "That is a complicated plot even for a bestselling book writer. For messages Ricky uses a private mail service he checks daily if he remembers to. We can fax the Cancún City office from the Mérida office."

They faxed Ricky, and Anna inquired at her hotel desk and learned that Señor Lupien had checked out. She told Luis, "In the wee hours. No forwarding address. But that's no guarantee he's gone. He may figure he has unfinished business."

"With both of us," Luis said.

They went to her room and took turns in the shower. It would be hours until they could expect a

response from the attorney, so they drove thirty-five kilometers northward to the gulf resort town of Progreso. They went barefoot on the beach, enjoying the cooling breeze. When they returned to Mérida, they bought cold drinks and sought relief from the vertical sun on a shady bench in the central plaza, the *zócalo*.

"You miss your daughters, don't you?"

Luis smiled.

"More than my babies miss me. They say I am more nuisance than help around the shop."

"You're not married?"

"No."

"Divorced or widowed?"

"Both. Ester is the child of one, Rosa the other."

"I'm sorry."

Luis looked at his watch. "Thirty minutes."

"Is the lawyer punctual?"

"Usually not, but he will be this time."

"Luis, I walked all over town for two days."

"I know."

"Tell me what I may've missed."

"Turn around."

"A bank in an old building," she said, looking across the street from the *zócalo*.

"The oldest. Constructed in the 1500's as a home by Francisco de Montejo, conqueror and plunderer, first boss of Mérida. See above the doorway?"

"The carvings? Oh my. Men standing on human heads."

"Conquistadors standing on the heads of Maya. Showing every-



body who is in charge. Look to your right through the trees."

"The cathedral?"

"Yes. Built in the time of the House of Montejo. The walls are blocks taken from demolished Maya temples. They say you can rub them in places and feel what remains of glyphs."

"Informative, but not exactly the Chamber of Commerce version, I imagine."

"It is slightly easier for the Maya now. I worry for my babies. They can bargain with tourists in the shop for trinkets. They can clean toilets in Cancún hotels. They can marry farmers and stay in the village and become baby machines."

Anna took the hand with which he'd ticked off the choices. "If our luck changes, we'll survive this, and there'll be *real* emeralds. You'll be paid a fee you deserve, and Ester and Rosa will get something green and shiny for their hope chests."

Luis did not know what a hope chest was, but her touch flushed his neck and ears, and he appreciated her kindness. "You had better go inside that café on the corner in case he is early."

He was early by five minutes, and as Luis and Anna had hoped, "he" turned out to be "they."

"Luis, I cannot believe you permitted this to happen," whined Ricardo Martinez Rodriguez as he stepped out of a shiny new Volkswagen Jetta that had pulled up to a taxi zone adjacent to the *zócalo*.

Several years ago Luis had

seen an ancient North American television program entitled *I Love Lucy*. Shave the attorney's pencil mustache and he could be the twin of Ricky Ricardo, Cuban bandleader. Despite protests, Ricardo had been Ricky to Luis ever since. "I am sorry, Ricky. I got to her too late."

The driver of the Jetta left it in the taxi zone and joined them. He had a salt and pepper beard and wore the confectionary colors of a professional golfer. Rimless glasses fronted eyes that were too steady, too sincere. Tynker's teeth were clenched in such a relentless smile that Luis thought for a moment he had lockjaw.

"Dr. Doyle Tynker," he said without offering a handshake.

"I am sorry about your wife, doctor," Luis said, studying his feet.

Tynker clapped Luis's shoulder. "As I've said on *Oprah*, guilt is a counterproductive emotion. I've devoted chapters to the subject. We need to proceed in a positive and proactive manner."

Luis nodded glumly, sat down with the other two men on the bench he'd occupied with Anna, and told his sad story. How he had followed her diligently. How she had had no rendezvous, no liaisons. Until late yesterday evening. When she departed arm in arm from her hotel with a gigantic Caucasian, who was perhaps European. How they had vanished into a street as dark as a cave. How Luis had kept a discreet interval. How he had sprint-



ed into the blackness in response to a terrible scream. How he'd raced in to find nothing but a pool of blood and an empty purse.

"Empty?" Tynker said, frowning through his awful grin.

"Dr. Tynker," Ricky said, "I am so sorry to learn that your wife was indeed involved in another man."

Leave it to Ricky to rate infidelity a more horrible fate than death. The handsome attorney was the world's leading infidelity expert, Luis thought. No attractive woman between puberty and the coffin was immune from his advances.

Tynker said to Luis, "I know you did your utmost. Considering your background, I have no regrets about having you on the job."

"Luis is the finest private detective in Yucatán, Dr. Tynker."

"Background?"

"As a commando in the Mexican Army and leader of various police SWAT teams," Ricky lied.

"Yes," Luis said, reading in Tynker's blank grin no anguish whatsoever that his wife was possibly unfaithful and/or dead. "That."

"From your professional experience, Luis, do you feel the motive was more sophisticated than mere animal lust?"

"Yes sir. Because of the empty purse and the suddenness. He robbed her of something very valuable, and her refusal to give it up may have cost her life."

Dr. Tynker frowned thoughtfully. "I cannot fathom what that

might be. We aren't poor, but I've counseled her well on not carrying excess cash or other valuables."

"An excellent policy, doctor," Ricky said.

"I'm the eternal optimist," said the pop psychologist. "Until her body's recovered, I refuse to accept that my beloved is dead. She could be merely a victim of a robbery, injured, wandering dazed, or in a hospital. Her empty purse, do you have it with you?"

Luis had made the empty purse up on the spot. He hesitated and said, "I determined that Mrs. Tynker is not a patient in any Mérida hospital. I lent the purse to people who are showing it around to see if it is recognized."

"Not the police?" Tynker asked, alarmed.

"Mérida underworld figures," Ricky said. "Luis has many contacts."

The police, the underworld; no difference to Luis. But he doubted if that was the reason Tynker was reluctant to notify the authorities.

"Involving police at this stage would only complicate the situation," Tynker said. "Have you checked her room recently, Mr. Balam?"

"Yes, sir. There is no indication she returned or left a message."

"Perhaps I should wait in the room. To be there for her."

"An excellent plan, sir," Ricky said. "In the meantime Luis and I will pursue leads."

"Telephone me every hour on the hour."

“Without fail, sir,” Ricky said before he gave Doyle Tynker directions to his wife’s hotel.

Tynker removed a hardcover book from a briefcase, signed it, and gave it to Luis. It was titled *You Parented Destiny’s Child: You*. “My latest and perhaps best. The *People* review was glowing. “Two hundred forty-four pages of nourishing food for thought,” if I may quote. Thanks to bungling and indifference by the publisher, sales have been disappointing. Feel free to page through when in a contemplative mood or in need of inner regeneration.”

Luis thanked Tynker and, after he was gone, asked Ricky if he could keep a secret.

“Of course I can keep a secret, Luis. Why are you holding me in suspense?”

They were in the corner café, drinking cold Leon Negra. “First you tell me some secrets, Ricky.”

Hurt feelings washed over the attorney’s face. “I have no secrets from you, Luis.”

“Tynker and his emerald smuggling?”

“Oh well, that. He mentioned in passing that besides immoral behavior he suspected his wife of blackmarket gemstone activities. She burns through his money and is constantly seeking more.”

“Be specific on the emeralds.”

“They come up from Colombia through Belize. Anna Tynker buys them from Belizeans and sells them in Mérida to dealers who smuggle them to North America and Europe. They buy them cheap

and pay no duties. This is business, and she meets men on these trips for fun.”

“She’s come to Mérida before?”

“I assume so, though Dr. Tynker was vague about frequency. He hired us this time because he is fed up and he wants to save his marriage. His goal in life is to help people be happy. That is the purpose of his books.”

“Have you read them, Ricky?”

“Not yet. I am sure they are outstanding literature. After all, with the exception of the last, they are bestsellers. Something bothers me, Luis. You faxed me. Did you fax Dr. Tynker, too?”

“No.”

“I went directly to his condo. He was packed. It was as if he was expecting me. We departed immediately in his car.”

“Phone him at the hotel.”

“It has not been an hour yet. I shall after I buy a drink for the *norteamericana* tourist lady at the table in the rear corner.”

“Now, Ricky.”

“She’s looking at me. Our mutual attraction is incredibly potent.”

“Ricky.”

He sighed, but got up and went to a telephone kiosk outside. When he returned, the tourist lady was sitting with Luis. Ricky began a patter with her, but Luis interrupted. “Is he there?”

“No.”

“I thought not. Ricky, meet Anna Tynker.”

“Was deceit necessary, Luis?” Ricky asked.

"Yes," he said as the threesome walked quickly to the hotel.

"There is plenty of deceit to go around, Mr. Martinez. What do you know that Luis and I don't?"

"Apparently I am the person who is the furthest on the outside of the situation."

"Dr. Doyle was very concerned about the purse and especially my whereabouts."

"He is concerned about you."

"He's concerned about my corpus delicti. He needs a stiff for the life insurance claim."

"You are too lovely to be so cynical."

"Buzz off, Ricky."

"Has anybody ever said to you that your eyes are the hue of the deepest emeralds?"

Anna laughed.

Luis told Ricky to give it up.

Tynker's Jetta was not in the hotel lot. Anna went inside and inquired at the desk.

"He asked the fastest route to Uxmal," she said. "Isn't that a ruin?"

"A great Classic Era Maya site. Who wants to see history?"

**L**uis's Beetle belched smoke the color of its oxidized blue paint. Anna clutched her knees the whole time, ninety minutes of white knuckles.

They blurred through small towns, low rolling hills, and scrub jungle. Only when they descended the last modest rise and saw the massive Uxmal structures kilometers in the distance did Anna permit herself to enjoy the scenery.

"Do you always drive like this?"

"I save big money on brake linings."

"Kamikaze pilots, tour bus drivers and Luis, they are in the same gene pool," Ricky said from the back seat.

Uxmal Archaeological Park was isolated. There were just a few hotels on the highway near the ruin. Luis slowed as Anna and Ricky scanned for the Jetta. They didn't locate it until Uxmal itself, and then the Jetta almost found them. They had to duck as Tynker flew out of the lot, a roostertail of limestone dust roiling behind him.

Luis, the least familiar of the three to Tynker, got out of the car and quickstepped within view of the highway. He came back and said, "He turned into the Hotel Hacienda Uxmal. A nice hotel and the oldest here. Does he always smile?"

"Dr. Doyle smiles and he smiles. I caught a glimpse just before I bopped my head on your glove compartment. This was a tooth-gritter."

"He was upset," Luis said.

"Uh-huh. He's anal about most everything. My impression is that he was stood up for an important appointment."

"Lupien," Luis said.

"The Frenchman?" Ricky said.

"He attempted murder and you thrashed him, Luis. Would he not be in Paris by now?"

Anna said, "Yeah, but if a fistful of emeralds is at stake, or believed to be, it'd be worth the risk."

"The same troubling question,"

Luis said. "Why did Tynker hire him to kill you and hire me to follow you?"

"Dr. Doyle will have to answer that one."

On foot Luis crossed the highway and cut through hotel property. From the edge of an annex building, he observed as a bellman showed Tynker to a ground floor room in the main hotel. It was a colonial-style quadrangle that surrounded the swimming pool.

In minutes Tynker came out in bathing trunks and sat in a pool-side lounge chair. He had sunglasses on, a book at his side, and a tall drink with fruit in it. He looked like an ordinary tourist.

Luis knew he would soon be conspicuous. Since it seemed Tynker would remain at the pool for a while, he went to his companions and suggested a quick tour of the ruin before nightfall. They could devise a surveillance plan under cover of darkness.

Massive buildings sprawled on grounds that would take a full day to cover adequately. They only had time for the best: the Palace of the Governor. On an earthen platform as long as a soccer pitch, stone adornments of symbols, geometric patterns, serpent heads, and a miscellany of arcane creatures covered the low, rectilinear palace.

Anna was entranced. She'd taken daytrips to Tulum and Chichén Itzá but hadn't seen a structure so rich. Ricky was grateful that Luis hadn't made them climb

something that would cause him to get dizzy and perspire.

Sundown came after a quick scrutiny. En route to the exit, they passed Uxmal's tallest building, a steep pyramid with elliptical ends known as the Temple of the Magician. Luis said, "See the steel cable running up it. You should use that to go up or down. The steps are at a forty-five degree angle."

"You should savor it from the ground, Anna," Ricky said. "I would not care to see you in danger."

"I already am, compliments of some people who shall go unnamed. How tall, Luis?"

"Thirty-eight meters. That is ten or twelve stories in a modern building. The back side of the temple is even steeper."

"What's our plan?" Anna asked.

Luis pointed to an open-air restaurant with a straw roof. "That *palapa* restaurant is near the highway. We can eat and drink and take turns checking on Dr. Tynker. Anna, do you have car keys?"

"Uh-huh. We rented it for the entire trip."

"Let me have them. I can repair it so it runs worse than mine."

"Good plan." Anna said. "We can peek and run. He can't go anywhere, and we may get lucky and catch him meeting somebody."

"Cloak and dagger makes me hungry and thirsty," Ricky said, snapping his fingers at a waiter.

Luis was back in ten minutes



with a bundle of black wires from under the Jetta's hood. "He is dressed but in the same chair, eating a sandwich."

After fifteen minutes Luis sent Ricky. The attorney walked gingerly into the darkness as if afraid he would step on a snake.

Out of curiosity Luis opened *You Parented Destiny's Child: You* to a page at random and read aloud. "The secret of a seamless revival of self, the emergence from the cocoon of mediocrity, essentially a rebirth, depends on prioritizing a short list of personal growth priorities. If you cannot separate the spiritual and psychometric wheat from the chaff, you are doomed to remain trapped in your dismal shell."

"You read English as well as you speak it," Anna said.

"What did I read?"

"That's the problem. Even for trendy psychobabble, Doyle's gone over the top. That stupid book is when our problems really began."

She paused at the sight of Ricky running to them as if he were being chased.

"Luis," he gasped. "Tynker and a group of people are headed toward us."

"Isn't the park closed at night?" Anna asked.

"Except for the sound and light shows."

"Like at Chichén Itzá, with the colored lights and the melodramatic music and voices narrating Maya history?"

"Same. At Uxmal you sit overlooking the Nunnery Quadrangle. They have lights set in the

ground that shine on walls erected thirteen hundred years ago," Luis said. "Somebody's version of history. It is for tourists. Does your husband like to do these tourist things?"

"No, and he's snobbish in that regard. Cutting oneself from the herd. That's a name of a chapter in the book you're holding."

"We have to move," Luis said, getting up and tossing the book into a trash container. "Here they come."

Luis, Anna, and Ricky scurried to the opposite edge of the restaurant. Their waiter gave chase, waving the check. Anna threw enough pesos to make him stop in his tracks and smile. They watched a dozen or so people pass by.

"Doyle isn't with anybody," Anna said. "Could he be meeting someone who's already there?"

"Yes. He could have hidden inside or be coming from a hotel in this area. I think there is a Club Med."

"He?" Ricky said. "That Frenchman? Highly unlikely."

"Oh my God," Anna said. "There he is."

From nowhere Andre Lupien had materialized in Tynker's group. He was wearing shorts far too tight and a T-shirt of some rock band. He puffed on a cigarette, strolling casually several paces behind Tynker. One eye was blackened, and his nose was swollen.

Luis extended his arms to halt his companions and ran to his car for a flashlight. They didn't

proceed until Lupien had entered the park. Others bound for the sound and light show appeared. They fell in with them and bought tickets.

"Where's Lupien?" Anna whispered as they approached the Nunnery Quadrangle.

"I saw Dr. Tynker take a seat," Ricky said.

Luis swiveled his head. A large silhouette was slowly ascending the Temple of the Magician on all fours.

He gave Anna the flashlight. "Stay with Tynker wherever he goes. Ricky, would you like to go for a climb?"

"I would, but somebody must protect Anna."

Luis felt his way around the Temple of the Magician, stumbling over piles of unrestored rubble. The rear face of the Magician would be no less treacherous. It had been built in phases over several hundred years. Not only was it steeper than the front at sixty degrees, the path upward was irregular.

He went to the first level and waited for the show to begin. With the distraction of the booming recording, he could pay less attention to stealth than to survival.

There was a boxlike temple on the top level. On the front side a French-accented voice called out in nasal English, "Don't be a sis-y and take all night."

Luis crept to an edge of the temple just as Dr. Doyle Tynker sat down heavily beside Andre Lupien.

"Do you have them?" Lupien demanded.

"When I called you from my wife's hotel, we agreed to meet hours ago."

"I like darkness. Do you have them?"

"I require proof she's dead, Lupien."

"Has she come home to you?"

"No."

"There you are. I told you I killed her."

"Without evidence, without a body and a death certificate, I cannot collect on the insurance and you will not be paid the real stones. I understand why you are out of sorts with me because of the paste imitations. That is normal human behavior."

"Imitations?"

"Surely she had them in the handbag you emptied."

Lupien said nothing and Tynker went on. "A safeguard. You come highly recommended by my Belizean colleagues, but you certainly can empathize with my caution. You could have simply snatched her purse. In fact, that is why I assigned a man to watch her until you made contact. If you or anybody else robbed her, he could thwart them. He was the man who found the empty purse and blood. Don't overcomplicate this. Just tell me what you did with her."

"An Indian?"

"Why yes, a native Mexican. How did you—"

"Give me the emeralds!"

"Not until—"

Luis heard a choking sound.

He sneaked a look. While Tynker held his throat and coughed, Lupien held a loupe in his good eye and examined emeralds with a pocket flashlight.

"These are fair quality," he said. "They aren't large and there aren't enough of them."

"Frankly, André, if you take the complications into consideration, a discounted fee is eminently fair," Tynker rasped.

"These are your complications. First, I snapped your wife's neck. Second, your Indian jumped me. He could have knocked me out and given me to the police. He's a strong little monkey, but I fought him off. Your wife is dead. Give me the rest of the emeralds."

The psychologist screamed, but not loudly enough to be heard over the resonant voices of ancient Maya. Luis stepped out and said, "Take it easy, boss."

Tynker was facedown on the steps, and the Frenchman was going through his pockets.

Lupien jerked Tynker up by the collar and closed an arm around his neck. Tynker was all eyes and teeth.

"Mind your own business, Indian, or I break his neck."

"I am Maya. Do not call me Indian and I will not call you euro-gringo."

"Anna," Luis yelled. "Let us see you."

Ten steps below, Anna shone Luis's flashlight on herself.

"You see, boss, you have no emeralds coming to you. No murder, no jewels."

Lupien relaxed his grip as he

gawked. Tynker sank his teeth into Lupien's hand. Lupien howled and opened his fist. The emeralds tinkled out.

Lupien backhanded Tynker and pawed for the fallen stones. Luis began to drag Tynker out of the way. Lupien swung a leg and caught Luis on a thigh, slamming him into the temple. He pinned Luis to the wall with one hand and pivoted, palm flattened.

Then he flinched and grabbed his shin. Anna swung again. Batteries went flying as the flashlight came apart and Lupien dropped to a knee. Luis drove a fist into his good eye. Lupien lurched backward, but Luis caught him by an ankle before he could tumble down.

"Nobody is hurt bad yet, boss."

"I'll go. Just give me one emerald for my trouble."

Luis gave the Frenchman a shove for his trouble. He slid and bounced to the ground, managing to slow himself somewhat with the cable, almost colliding with Ricky who was finally upward bound. Lupien staggered to his feet and limped away without too much additional damage.

"Not a bad fall," Luis said. "The Boy Heroes of Chapultepec jumped farther."

Whether Tynker had been knocked unconscious or had fainted was unclear. He was awake, though, telling Anna that he could explain.

She had collected four emeralds. "Explain where the other stones are, Doyle. You won't need them in prison."

“You will have a devil of a time prosecuting me, you realize. Relatively little harm was done to you. You’re in a foreign country with corrupt police departments. The perpetrator is long gone. We can arrive at an amicable middle ground, Anna.”

“He has a point,” Ricky said.

“Maybe not too long gone, Tynker,” Luis said. “His business with me is done, but I think he still has business with you.”

“Speaking of corrupt, Doyle, are you offering to buy me off?”

Tynker dug in a pocket and produced a dozen more emeralds. “I brought these for negotiation purposes. There are no more.”

“Sign the divorce papers however I write them?”

“Within reason.”

“I decide what’s within reason, Doyle.”

Tynker sighed. “Very well. One question.”

Anna tensed. “What?”

Tynker delicately touched his face.

“Did that animal mark me? My agent’s trying to get me on Regis and Kathie Lee.”

“Doyle, I’ll fondly remember those as our last words.”

Luis told him to stay where he was for at least thirty minutes and savor the evening. They would make sure the Frenchman really was long gone. Outside the archaeological park Anna divided the stones.

“This is too big a fee,” Luis said.

“Yes, it is,” Ricky said.

Luis gave Anna back two of Ricky’s emeralds. He knew better than to complain.

She said, “Those wires you took out of the Jetta, what did you do with them?”

“They’re in the bushes.”

“Are they important?”

“Only if he wants to go somewhere. They’re the spark plug wires.”

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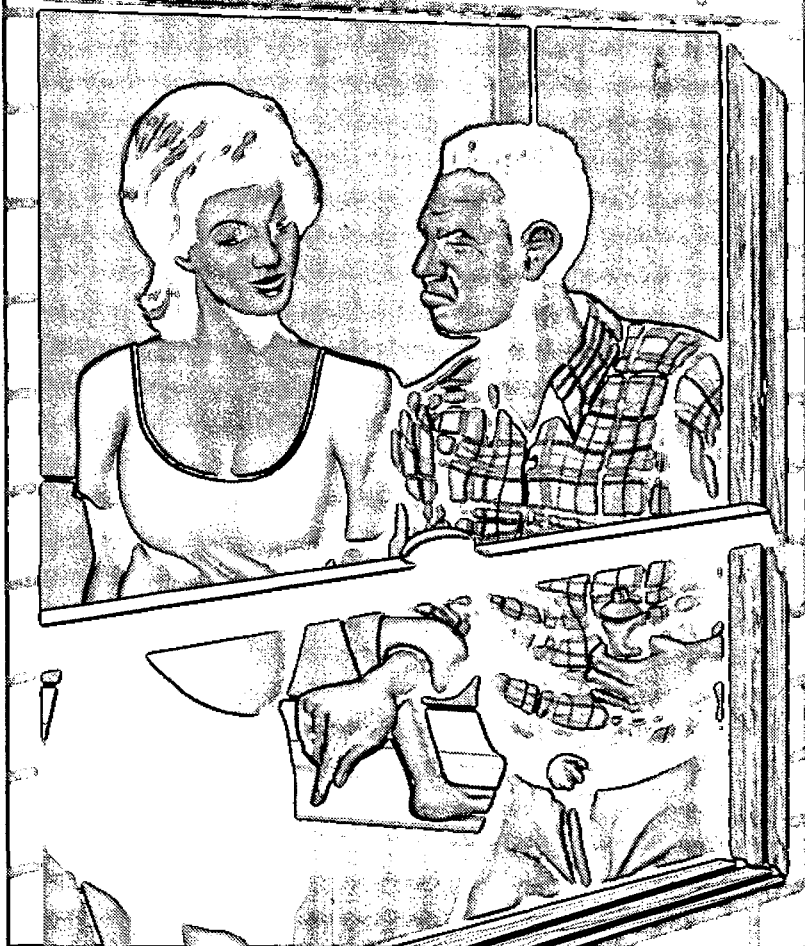
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FICTION

# SO FAR SO GOOD

Sam Pizzo



**E**lmo was watching his wife. She picked up a new tube of toothpaste and squeezed it . . . *right . . . in . . . the . . . MIDDLE!* Now they had toothpaste at both ends of the tube and a huge dent in the middle. Elmo's stomach was pure acid. If he told her once, he told her a thousand times, squeeze it from the bottom. That way all the toothpaste is forced, one squeeze at a time, toward the top where the hole is. Was that too much to ask? Elmo thought not.

"The hell you doing that for?" he said to her.

"What?" she said.

Elmo did not get an answer to his question. His wife answered his question with a question of her own, a very old and feminine trick of which Elmo was well aware.

"Why you squeezing it that way?"

"What way?"

She did it again.

Elmo was so mad at her he went to bed without brushing his teeth. He stayed way over on his side of the bed, and he turned his back to her side because he wanted her to know how mad she had caused him to be.

Elmo's wife came to bed and she was wearing a sweet-smelling perfume. Then she lit the candle on the nightstand. How did Elmo know she lit the candle when his back was turned to her? Elmo was a rational and analytical person. He heard the "scritch" of a match and his wife did not smoke, thus—elementary, logical. She turned off the light.

"Are you mad at me, sweetums?" she said.

"Me? Mad?"

Elmo answered her question with questions of his own. Two can play that game!

Elmo was awakened by the sound of his wife's clock radio. He pretended to be asleep. She did her morning exercises, showered, dressed, and flounced off to work without so much as a howdy-do. What if Elmo had passed away in the night? She wouldn't have known, much less cared.

Elmo stormed into the bathroom and—*lo and behold!*—a new roll of bathroom tissue was on the spindle with the loose end going down the back instead of coming toward the front. Elmo felt like his brain was being twisted in a knot. How could she do that to him? Every nerve in his body was short-circuited. He shivered from top to bottom like he had bitten into a piece of aluminum foil, like he had scraped his fingernails on a blackboard or chomped a fuzzy peach. Elmo was this far from bonkers.

Elmo staggered to the kitchen. His wife had left a granola bar and a glass of juice on the table for his breakfast. The hell kind of breakfast was that? A guy needed eggs and bacon and toast and lots of hot coffee. And there was a note. It said, "I love you." That was it? No apol-



ogy? No asking for forgiveness? Elmo did not eat the breakfast bar, and he did not drink the juice. He thundered out of their apartment and slammed the door. In point of fact, he went back and slammed the door again because he wanted the neighbors in their apartment building to know how mad she had caused him to be.

Elmo cashed his unemployment check at the liquor store and bought a six-pack. Then he went to the home of his good friend Manny to watch the soap operas with Manny and a group of guys from the bowling alley on Manny's large screen TV, which he got to keep in his latest divorce.

When Elmo arrived at Manny's, the guys were milling around and Manny was barbecuing sausages in his carport. Elmo placed his six-pack next to the mustard and buns on the tailgate of Manny's pick-em-up truck.

When the sausages were done, Manny flipped them in the air, hot from the grill, and the guys had to catch them with their bare hands. If a guy dropped his hot sausage, he was given the raspberry with much teasing and goodnatured joshing, like a stiff punch on the arm or a friendly smack on the head or both. Then one of the guys would shake up the beers and toss them to whoever wanted one, which was everybody. When they popped the tabs—foam everywhere!

At noon they lumbered into the living room of Manny's mobile home, jostling and maneuvering to get the best seat in front of Manny's big-screen TV. Manny turned the TV on, and they hunkered down, draining off their beers, belching and scratching and generally making themselves comfortable. They gave loud cheers when their programs started and gave high fives when the good persons got the better of the bad persons and booed and hissed when the bad persons got the better of the good persons. During commercials they did the wave.

When the soaps were over for the day, Elmo and the guys would hang around discussing, sometimes arguing, about which soap was best and what would be the best strategy for their favorite soap opera person to use to get out of the pickle he or she was in. The discussions were heated, but they were a caring, friendly group of guys and nobody left Manny's mobile home until all fights were stopped, cuts and bruises were bandaged, and all hurt feelings were discussed and resolved with bear hugs all around.

The guys were drifting out of Manny's place a few at a time, hugging and patting butts, when Elmo noticed that Manny was crying, not loud but tears were dripping from his chin and landing on his *Mother* tattoo. Elmo comforted Manny by giving him a stiff punch on his arm and whacks to his head.

"Elmo," said Manny in a choked whisper, "it doesn't get any better than this."

Elmo swallowed . . . hard!

Elmo went home to his apartment, and his wife said to him, "You're drunk."

It was true that Elmo shared a six-pack with Manny and the guys. Maybe they had more than one six-pack. Maybe they ran out and bought more six-packs. Maybe they had like fifteen or twenty six-packs, but he was not . . . what was that word?

"Drunk!"

That was the word! Elmo was very offended. He wanted to fold his arms across his chest, but he could not remember how. He wanted to give her a deadly glare, but she was too many.

They ate dinner in silence. Then Elmo heard a sound. What was that noise? It sounded like somebody was talking to him from far, far away, outside maybe. Come in!

"I am in," said his wife.

Oh.

Then Elmo's wife was critical of him. Imagine that! She said Elmo cared more for his friends than he did for her. She would never understand. It was a guy thing. Then she found fault with Elmo's table manners. She said it bugged her the way he tucked his napkin under his chin. It belonged in his lap. Well, lah . . . dee . . . dah! And she wanted Elmo to get his elbows off the table. Couldn't she see that if Elmo took his elbows off the table, his face would fall in the chicken tetrazzini? Then she didn't like the way he sucked air between his teeth. Elmo's father sucked air between his teeth. His father before him sucked air between his teeth, and Elmo sucked air between his teeth. Sssuck! Sssuck! Ssss . . . Ssss . . . Elmo was dizzy . . . very dizzy . . . Darkness.

When Elmo awakened in the morning, he was still at the dining room table, and it was covered with last night's dirty dishes. He smelled the leftover tetrazzini and he did not feel well. He wondered if she had poisoned him. And where was she? She should be cooking his breakfast, but no, she was in the bed. Elmo stomped around their apartment banging drawers, kicking things, and playing the stereo full volume. She was still in the bed. After all the kindness and patience he had shown to her, their marriage was falling apart and it was not his fault.

Elmo wrenched open the bathroom door and—*lo and behold!*—the seat was down. Surely she knew a guy needed to have the seat up. Was that too much to expect? Certainly not. Elmo shouldn't have to tell her that, but if he put the seat up, she put it down. Up! Down! Up! Down! UP! DOWN! Elmo was one step away from the bughouse. He had half a mind to just let the chips fall where they may. Teach her a lesson. There was a principle here.

Elmo slammed the door to their apartment like it had never been

slammed before. He went to the bus station to play video games to kill a few hours before going to Manny's place.

When he arrived at Manny's, he was not hungry, so he did not join in the fun of trying to catch hot sausages and he was too depressed to enjoy beer foam in his hair. When the soaps came on, Elmo went along with the high fives and he banged bellies with the guys when the bad person got his comeuppance, but his heart was not in it. His wife had made him so upset he was not able to enjoy his programs.

Elmo's friend Manny was a veteran of many marriages, and he was sensitive and tuned in to the emotional strain a guy was subjected to in the male versus female relationship. Manny sensed Elmo's depressed state of mind, and he whispered that they would chat during the next commercial message from the sponsor.

During the panty-liner, Manny encouraged Elmo to let it all hang out. Elmo talked nonstop for two minutes, and he was shocked at the depth of emotion his wife had caused in him. When the commercial message from the sponsor was over, Manny said not one word. Was Manny thinking? Was he ignoring Elmo? Two more commercial messages went by and nothing. Elmo was this far away from telling Manny that his feelings had been deeply hurt when, during the acid indigestion, Manny said that Elmo's situation was a case of life imitating art. Manny told Elmo he should think back a few months to their favorite soap opera when the bad wife felt she wasn't getting enough attention from her good husband. What did she do? She put a bomb in his birthday present. When he opened it, it exploded, killing him and two of his girlfriends. She lived happily ever after on his insurance money.

Elmo remembered that sad and tragic story. Was Manny trying to tell Elmo that his wife was going to kill him? Elmo believed his wife was trying to drive him crazy, all right, but kill him? He doubted that. He had been too good to her. On the other hand, since he was laid off at the sewage treatment facility, she had been paying his insurance premiums with her own money.

Elmo went home, and his wife said to him, "You are drunk!"

She was always jumping to conclusions. What in the world made her think Elmo was drunk?

"You are crawling on your hands and knees."

Oh.

"And where did you get that revolver?"

How did she find out about that?

"It's in your hand."

Oh.

"Are you planning to shoot somebody?"

Only time will tell.

"I think you'd better leave the revolver on the floor and crawl away as fast as you can."

Now why would Elmo do a dumb thing like that?

"So I won't knock your brains out with my purse."

I'm crawling! I'm crawling . . . I'm spinning . . . spinning . . . Darkness.

Elmo woke up on the living room floor. He thought he had died and gone to heaven because he smelled bacon and eggs and toast and coffee. Elmo's wife said that since today was his birthday she wanted to cook a nice breakfast for him. They would eat on the little balcony of their apartment and watch the sun come up the way they used to do when they were first married. And after breakfast Elmo could open his birthday present.

Uh-oh! Elmo stared at his birthday present. It was nicely wrapped with a ribbon and a bow, and he was reminded of the bad wife in his favorite soap who rigged the good husband's birthday present with dynamite. Manny was right. Life was imitating art. If Elmo opened the present—poof!—he would be no more. Elmo knew that if he wanted to continue living the good life with Manny and the guys he would have to do something fast.

Elmo's wife was chatty and friendly during breakfast, which Elmo might have enjoyed had he not known what she was planning to do to him. Then it occurred to Elmo that if he could lure his wife closer to the railing of the balcony and if she happened to lose her balance, it was six stories to the sidewalk. That would be a terrible tragedy indeed.

While Elmo pondered how he could entice her to move closer to the railing, she stood up and—*lo and behold!*—she leaned over the railing.

"Your friend Manny is down there," she said.

Elmo leaned over the railing, too, but he did not see his friend Manny.

"You have to lean way, way over," she said.

Elmo leaned way, way over. His wife grabbed the seat of his pants and boosted him over the railing. As Elmo tumbled over the side, he grabbed his wife's hand, and they went over the railing together.

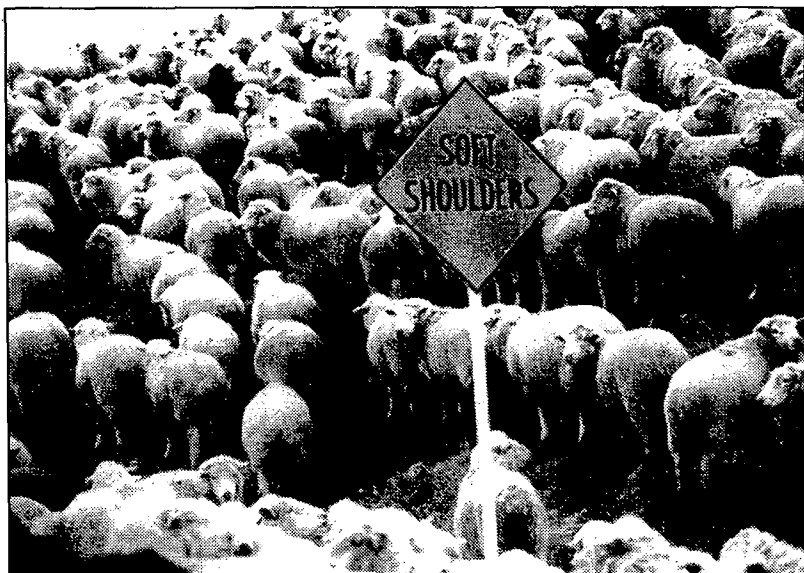
As they sped toward the sidewalk, Elmo was aware of the warmth and softness of his wife's hand. It had been a long time since he held her hand. It was nice.

Elmo squeezed her hand and said, "Maria . . ." Elmo called his wife Maria because that was her name. "Maria," he said, "you doing okay?"

"So far so good," she said. Then she laughed the way she used to laugh when she and Elmo were first married. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Elmo laughed, too. "Ha, ha, h . . ."

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



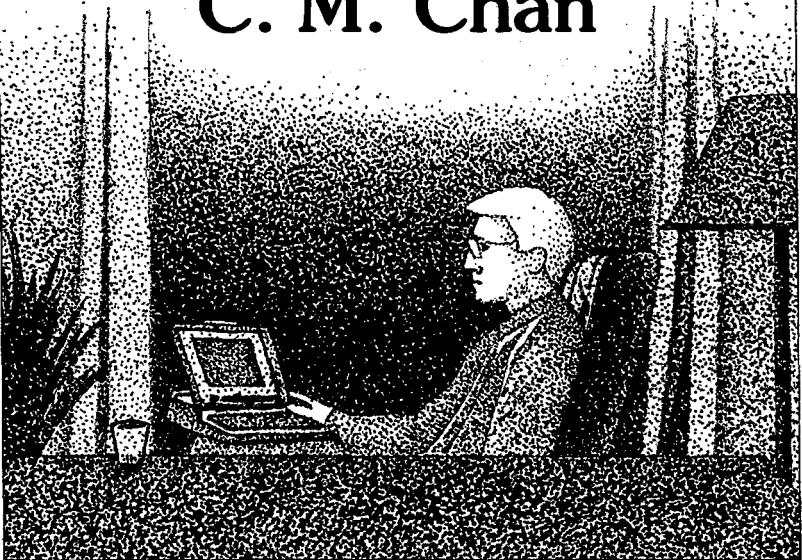
*Linda Dufurrena / Adventure Photo & Film*

Aw. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "January Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the July/August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

# DEATH IN THE DALES

C. M. Chan



**T**he grey Jaguar sped west along the A59, leaving York and the train station behind. It was a beautiful June day, and the windows of the car were rolled down to let in the fresh country air, ripe with the smells of growing things. In the back seat a Borzoi hound pushed his elegant nose out into the wind, sniffing happily.

"We're dining out tonight," said Phillip Bethancourt. "I told Mother you wouldn't mind."

Detective Sergeant Jack Gib-

bons did not look up from the book in his lap.

"Oh," he said.

"It's some new little restaurant that's opened up in Appletreewick," went on Bethancourt, slackening speed slightly while he bent to light a cigarette. "It's apparently all the rage up here—or at least my mother and her friends think so."

"Um," said Gibbons.

"I can't quite make out whether it's the food or the charm of the proprietor that's got them all so





excited," added Bethancourt. "But, well, we'll see this evening. Mother felt bad about going out on your first night here, but she'd already made plans with the Sturridges last week."

"Of course," said Gibbons absently.

The mechanical responses of his friend finally came to Bethancourt's notice. He glanced at Gibbons, who remained with his eyes focused on his book, unaware of the pause in the conversation. "Of course," said Bethancourt experimentally, "it may be a little chilly, since the place is on top of Thorpe Fell and there aren't any walls or anything. But I didn't think you'd mind that."

"Oh," said Gibbons again.

Bethancourt lifted his hand from the gearshift and placed it over the book. Gibbons looked up at once. "What?" he said. "I mean, that's a very good idea."

"What on earth are you reading?" said Bethancourt curiously. "You haven't heard a word I've been saying."

"Of course I have," replied Gibbons indignantly. "You were talking about—about—"

"It doesn't look like a novel," said Bethancourt, trying to pull the book away from his friend's firm grasp.

"It's not," said Gibbons, jerking it back. "If you must know, it's the police manual."

"Ah. A real page-turner, no doubt."

"Well, I have to know the stuff in here," said Gibbons defensively. "And since it's been so quiet

lately, Superintendent Carmichael said it would be a good time and gave me a few days off."

Bethancourt merely raised his eyebrows as he negotiated a curve. "A good time to review rules you know-by heart anyway?" he said.

"No. I was going to tell you—I'm eligible to take the inspector's exams."

Bethancourt beamed at him. "That's wonderful, Jack," he said. "I didn't know you could make inspector at your age."

"Well, I'll be one of the youngest if I pass," admitted Gibbons. "But Carmichael thinks I'll have no problem."

"Of course you'll pass—easily, I'm sure."

"Not without studying," said Gibbons. "I wasn't like you at Oxford—I didn't spend all day and night frolicking and then pull off a first without ever opening a book."

"I did spend *some* time reading," said Bethancourt wryly. "Anyway, I'm sure you'll do splendidly. When do you sit for it?"

"In two weeks," answered Gibbons. "But I've only got this week off, so I'll have to do most of my studying now."

"Well, you'll get plenty of peace and quiet to do it in up here," said Bethancourt. "I have to admit I was awfully surprised when you said you'd come."

"And I was surprised to find out you were here. You hadn't mentioned the trip." Gibbons eyed his friend. "Your parents are quite all right, aren't they?"

"They're splendid," said Beth-

ancourt. "I told you that on the phone."

Gibbons did not reply. It was not inconceivable that a man might take it into his head to visit his parents on the spur of the moment, but that had not, in the past, been Bethancourt's habit. Trips to his childhood home were carefully scheduled around holidays and family birthdays and never undertaken at other times.

They drove on in silence under a clear blue sky dotted with fleecy clouds while the Pennines rose on the horizon before them.

"So why did you come up?" asked Gibbons at last, laying aside the police manual.

Bethancourt drew on his cigarette and stared out the windscreen. "I wanted to think," he replied slowly. "Several things have happened recently—a series of incidents, if you like. It's rather awkward, really. I'm not entirely certain what to do."

"About what?" demanded Gibbons.

Bethancourt crushed the cigarette out in the ashtray, exhaling the smoke in a stream carried away by the wind. "Marla," he answered.

"Oh."

Marla Tate, one of England's top fashion models, was Bethancourt's girlfriend, and she and Gibbons did not get along particularly well. Marla loathed Bethancourt's amateur detective hobby and looked on Gibbons as the source from which Bethancourt's interest stemmed. Which, in fact, was true.

Bethancourt had relapsed into preoccupied silence after this declaration. Behind his glasses his hazel eyes were thoughtful.

"What's brought all this on?" asked Gibbons, always practical. "You said something happened?"

His friend hesitated and then repeated what had occurred a fortnight ago, the day before Marla had left for a week's fashion shoot in Italy. It had been a rainy Sunday morning, with the bedclothes in disarray and the pillows scrunched comfortably behind their backs. The *Sunday Times* was strewn over all with cups of coffee balanced precariously on the unread sections. Marla had tossed aside the Arts supplement and, stretching, said with forced casualness, "Phillip, I've been meaning to ask you for a favor."

"Yes?" He lifted his eyes from the *TLS* to meet hers.

"I wanted to ask you if, when I get back from Italy, you'd come to Paris with me and help me find a *pied à terre*. Your French is so much better than mine."

Bethancourt was galvanized, but he remained absolutely still.

"I didn't know," he said, "that you were planning to get a flat there."

"Just a small one. I've been doing some figuring lately, and a flat would actually cost less than all the money I've been spending on hotels during the shows."

It sounded perfectly reasonable, but there was an underlying current in the conversation that Bethancourt couldn't quite



identify and that sounded a warning bell in his mind. He started to object and then stopped himself. That he could persuade Marla a *pied à terre* was unnecessary he was certain, but it suddenly struck him as ridiculous that he should bother. What, after all, was wrong with the idea? So he said, "Of course I'll help you. I don't know any estate agents in Paris, but my woman here will set us up. I'll speak to her tomorrow."

Marla leaned forward to kiss him. "Thank you, darling."

He had rung his estate agent as he had promised but had otherwise managed to ignore the episode and its implications in the ridiculous hope that it would all go away if he paid it no attention. Until, of course, she'd phoned him at the end of the week from New York.

"It doesn't sound like such a disaster to me," said Gibbons.

"No, not in and of itself. But it's a sign of things to come. The real problem is that I've suddenly realized I've never thought much about the relationship and I'd better start." Bethancourt sighed. "Do you remember, Jack," he said, "when you were younger and thought falling in love would be an overpowering emotion, absolutely unmistakable?"

Gibbons shifted in his seat. "I know I don't have as much as experience as you," he said, "but I guess I still think that, more or less."

"Somewhere in my heart so do I. But what if it's not true? What

if we only believe it because we want it to be true? Perhaps what I feel for Marla is all there is."

Gibbons raised his eyebrows. "Aren't you in love with her?" he asked.

Bethancourt sighed. "I don't know."

To this Gibbons had no answer.

They were silent as Bethancourt made the turn into the southernmost reaches of Wharfedale, slackening speed to accommodate the narrower road. The remains of Bolton Priory passed by on their right as the car climbed up the dale, while the fells rose in majestic splendor all about them, marked by the long, wavering lines of dry stone walls.

The same walls hedged the road, preventing any sort of view around the bends, as was demonstrated when, rounding a corner, Bethancourt was forced to stamp on the brakes, throwing Gibbons forward against his safety belt. The Jaguar pulled up abruptly, stopping well short of a figure trudging along the narrow verge. This was a man a little under average height and very thin, dressed in grime-encrusted blue-jeans, heavy workboots, and a faded workshirt. His limp black hair overhung his collar, and atop his head was an extraordinary hat, so worn that both its original shape and color were indecipherable. "Damme if that isn't Tom Poots," said Bethancourt.

"Who?" asked Gibbons, but Bethancourt was already leaning out his window.

"Tom!" he called, and the man



turned, revealing a weathered, saturnine face beneath the hat's brim.

"Is that you, Mr. Bethancourt?" he said, stepping toward the car.

"Of course it's me. What are you doing walking along here? Was that your bus we passed in the lay-by back there?"

"That's right." Poots bent to the window. "She broke down on me. I'm just heading in to Apple-treewick for a part."

He pronounced it Aprick.

"Hop in," responded Bethancourt. "We'll give you a lift if you don't mind sharing the back seat with Cerberus."

Poots chuckled. "No trouble there." He settled himself beside the great dog and Bethancourt let in the clutch.

"This is Jack Gibbons," he said. "Jack, Tom Poots."

Gibbons reached back to shake hands. Upon withdrawing his hand he found a large oily smear on the palm and looked about surreptitiously for something to wipe it off on. Failing in this, he sighed and rested the offending extremity palm up in his lap.

"So how are you, Tom?" Bethancourt was asking. "I haven't seen you since last Christmas."

"I'm well enough. Are you still living in that sinful city down south?"

"I'm afraid so."

"When are you going to come to your senses and come back to God's country?"

Bethancourt sighed. "Not for awhile yet. How are Sarah and the children?"

"Fine, fine. Youngest is walking now—gets into everything and drives Sarah wild. You're not married yet?"

"No. Not even close."

Gibbons lost interest in the conversation as Bethancourt and Poots went on to Poots's doings and local gossip. Poots had one of the strongest Yorkshire accents Gibbons had ever encountered, and he found he had to listen carefully to understand. Much better to lean back and revel in the wonders of nature all around.

They crossed the Wharfe at Barden and went on to Apple-treewick, a small and ancient hamlet perched on a hillside and the nearest village to Bethancourt's home. Here they dropped Poots, Bethancourt slipping him a five pound note to quench his thirst in the pub, and then continued on into the countryside.

"Quite an accent," remarked Gibbons as Bethancourt guided the car down the hill and around a small lake before shifting gears to make the next climb.

Bethancourt grinned.

"You should have heard his granddad. He spoke broad Yorkshire—practically a different language. I haven't heard it in years now."

"Tom's was enough for me. He's a quaint old fellow, isn't he?"

"Old?" Bethancourt cast Gibbons a look. "He's my sister's age. Just four years older than you and I."

Gibbons was surprised. "Really? I'd put him down at forty or so. He must have a hard life."



"The Pootses live by the skin of their teeth," acknowledged Bethancourt. "Mostly, I should guess, by poaching, although Tom has other talents; he does sheep shearing in season, and he's a wonder at dry stone walls. You grow up quicker in country life; he may not be much older than we are, but he's been married for eight years and has four children."

"No doubt he didn't waste as much time at university as we did."

"No." Bethancourt smiled. "I think he left school when he was fourteen, possibly fifteen."

"You seem to know a lot about him."

"Well, the Pootses have been the perennial thorn in the side of the Bethancourts ever since William Bethancourt bought the Grange in the 1840's. They were tenants of ours then, of course, and according to my grandfather, they haven't changed much since. Besides, Tom and I were mates of a sort at one time."

"You were?" Somehow Gibbons could not envision this.

"The year before I went away to school," affirmed Bethancourt. "I thought he was splendid. He had his own gun and actually hit what he shot at a fair part of the time. I followed him about endlessly. My mother was appalled."

"I daresay."

Bethancourt grinned as he made the turn into the drive of Wethercross Grange. The drive wound uphill, overshadowed by ash trees, until the land flattened out and they came in sight

of the house. It was small and rather humble for a manor house, built in the eighteenth century from a design by John Carr and shaped like the letter L but still retaining the air of a glorified farmhouse. It was neat and plain, grey stone picked out by the white trim of the windowpanes.

Bethancourt drove past the frontage, into the court formed by the L-shape, and pulled up beside a blue Range Rover and a white Volvo wagon. From within they were greeted by a chorus of barks from the Grange spaniels. Cerberus, always dignified, merely pricked his ears.

"Here we are," said Bethancourt. "The perfect spot for swotting up on police procedure. No distractions guaranteed."

"I don't know about that," retorted Gibbons, getting out. "You're here. It's the distractions that seem guaranteed to me."

"On my honor," said Bethancourt, opening the boot and extracting Gibbons' bag, "I'll be good. No urgings to come to the pub or the Grassington Festival or to let me teach you to ride. Unless, of course," he added hopefully, "you'd like to learn to ride?"

"Not again," groaned Gibbons who had turned down this generous offer on nearly every visit he had made to the Grange.

"Oh well," said Bethancourt cheerfully, "you can't blame a chap for hoping. Come on. Mother's put you in the same room as before."

He led the way inside.

The Sturridges were a local fam-



ily with whom the Bethancourts were close. Daniel Sturridge was a childhood friend of Phillip's who had returned to Yorkshire after university and followed his father at the bar. His parents and his wife Catherine made up the rest of the party.

"I think you've met all the Sturridges before," said Mrs. Bethancourt to Gibbons, as they entered the small restaurant, "so it will be quite cosy. I did try to get Daniel's sister Allison to come as well and to bring a friend so we wouldn't be so short on ladies, but she had another engagement."

"Jack doesn't care about that, Ellen," said her husband. "It's only an informal dinner, after all."

The Bethancourts were in their late fifties, both tall, both blond. Ellen Bethancourt was the fairer of the two, her hair artfully restored to the same tow color as her son's, her figure still slim and upright despite the years. Bethancourt favored her rather than his father, whose features were less delicate though still well-formed. Robert Bethancourt was a magistrate and looked the part, his pale hair mostly gone to silver and his youthful slenderness replaced by a more substantial form. He seemed not at all disturbed by the fact that his son had ended up, after a late growth spurt, an inch or two taller than his parent.

The restaurant was an elite establishment, unobtrusively expensive while preserving the air of a country inn. It was a rather

fine line to walk, but the proprietor had done it very well, and Bethancourt was not surprised that his mother liked the place.

"Did I mention, Phillip," said his mother over her grouse, "that the Warburtons have finally rented Beck Cottage again?"

Frank Sturridge snorted. "They should have looked a little more closely into whom they were renting to," he said.

"They did look into it, Father," said Daniel.

"Why?" asked Bethancourt. "Who is it?"

"A woman named Susan James," answered his father. "A writer."

"I think I've heard of her," said Bethancourt. "Her first novel came out last year, and I read the review in the *TLS*. I believe it was nominated for the Booker, although of course it didn't get it."

"Did you read the book?" asked Gibbons.

"No—it didn't seem my sort of thing. I can't recall the title now, but it was about poverty-stricken people in Wales. Anyway, I can't see what's so objectionable about her."

"It's not Susan James herself," answered Ellen Bethancourt with a glance at her husband. "Although of course we haven't actually met her—"

"We have," put in Mary Sturridge. "She was at the Warburtons' dinner a fortnight or so ago. You remember, Ellen, you had that charity dinner and couldn't come. She seemed quite intelligent, I thought."

"For heaven's sake, Mother,"



said Daniel, "if she was nominated for the Booker, you can't have thought she was stupid."

"So what on earth is wrong with an intelligent author renting Beck Cottage?" asked Bethancourt.

"She apparently," said his father, "is progressing from poverty-stricken people in Wales, to poverty-stricken people in Yorkshire. She's been racing round the countryside interviewing all sorts of people and tagging along with the farmhands while they milk the cows. Some of the smallholders are rather upset about it, and others think they're about to become celebrities. I don't suppose there's anything really wrong with it all, but she has stirred things up. Tedious, really."

"The Warburtons aren't too pleased," said Ellen. "Not that they mind what she does, but they thought they'd got a nice, reliable tenant, and now it looks like she'll be going on once her book is finished."

"She might want to keep it," suggested Catherine, shifting a little in her chair. She was six months pregnant with her first child, and her feet were clearly bothering her. "We spoke at dinner that night, and she was all praise for the Dales. She said how sorry she was she hadn't discovered them before this."

"She might at that," agreed her husband. "Would you like me to see if they have a footstool or something, Cathy? It might help."

"No, no. I'll be all right."

Bethancourt tried to imagine

Marla pregnant and himself solicitously fetching stools, but somehow the picture refused to jell in his mind. He wondered what Daniel had felt for Catherine when he had proposed. Perhaps the desire to settle down was supposed to come first.

The chef and owner, one Mark Boudelman, appeared around the coffee stage. He was in his mid-thirties and rather handsome if one allowed for a certain corpulence, and he undoubtedly knew how to make his clientele happy. He was both respectful and genial and managed to maintain the illusion that he really had nothing better to do than to hobnob with his favorite customers. Bethancourt was more impressed with the history of the man's culinary training, which was trotted out for his benefit by his mother and Mrs. Sturridge.

Afterwards Bethancourt and Daniel were sent out to fetch the cars. The air was crisp and cool as they wandered down the village street. "So," said Bethancourt, "are you all ready for fatherhood? How much longer is it, by the way?"

"Another three months," answered Sturridge. "It's not been easy on Cathy—I swear, it feels like it's already been nine months or maybe more." Bethancourt made sympathetic noises. "What about you?" asked Sturridge. "Still dating that model, are you?"

"Yes."

"Well, to each his own. Maybe someday you'll feel like settling down."



"I don't see," said Bethancourt plaintively, "why you should assume I won't settle down with Marla. Being a model doesn't preclude being a wife."

Sturridge looked startled. "Yes, of course, I'm sorry," he said. "It's just that, well, I always thought she was more of a trophy for you than—oh lord, that sounds even worse. Look, I'm sorry, old man, I really didn't mean to be offensive."

Bethancourt felt as if he had received a blow in the solar plexus. However much he might like to deny it, the impetus for his initial pursuit of Marla had been precisely because she fell into that category. The question was, had anything changed since then? He smiled, covering his inner confusion, and said, "That's all right. Here's our car—see you back at the restaurant."

On their return to the Grange, Gibbons retired to his room, clutching his police manual, while Bethancourt wandered into the library in search of a place to brood. His mother had left a copy of *H&G* out on the table, open at the beginning of an article on summer flowers. On the opposite page was an advertisement for a popular perfume featuring a head-and-shoulders shot of Marla Tate, apparently nude except for a swath of chiffon. Bethancourt stared down for a moment at the sleepy, jade-green eyes and the abundance of copery hair. Then he flipped the magazine closed and went to sit

in one of the leather armchairs. He lit a cigarette and let his mind wander back to the innocuous phone call that had thrown his well-ordered life into disarray.

Marla had been due back from Italy the following afternoon, and he had been surprised to hear she was now in New York.

"Do you mind putting off the Paris trip?" she had asked. "My agent set up this New York interview at the last minute. I rather doubt I'll get it, but as long as I'm here there are some other things I should look into."

"It's not a problem," he answered. "I didn't make a firm date with the estate agent in any case. We can go whenever you're ready."

"Thank you, darling," she said. "I do appreciate it. Ron—the photographer from Italy, you know—says he may be able to put something my way, so I'm not sure exactly when I'll be back. I'll ring and let you know, but I do have another shoot scheduled next week. Perhaps the week after that?"

"Fine," he had answered, but apparently the hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach transferred itself to his voice, for she had paused.

"Phillip? Is everything all right?"

"Of course it is. I've just said so. I'll see you when you get back."

But the conversation had brought to the fore what had so troubled him about the idea of a *piéd à terre* in Paris, and at last he identified it. Something in him had recognized the plan for what it was: a spreading of her



wings, the first short hop from the nest. Marla was twenty-three, if she wished to take her career any further, to metamorphose into a supermodel, she would have to move to New York.

He had been certain then that she meant to leave him, even if she did seem to be taking a curiously circuitous route, and childishly, his initial instinct was to leave her first. But then he had recalled something that had occurred nearly a month before, an incident he had dismissed from his mind at the time but which now rose from his subconscious to trouble him anew.

He had gone to an art gallery opening one weekend while Marla was away and had run into Myra Berens, a young sculptress whose work he admired. In fact, he had bought a small piece of hers the previous year. They had chatted pleasantly over a decent white wine accompanied by an insipid cheese, and when she had inquired if he were free to go on to dinner, he had accepted with pleasure. He had enjoyed himself thoroughly, and it was only at the dinner's end, when Myra had invited him to continue the evening at her flat, that he became aware that he had, perhaps, flirted more than he should. He had declined, of course, but what troubled him was that he had very much wanted to accept. Normally he compared women to Marla's standard of beauty and style—a test that rarely showed them in a favorable light—and smiled inwardly at the idea that

they could tempt him. Myra, although certainly an attractive woman, did not even come as close to passing the test as some others had, and yet he had been very tempted indeed.

"There you are, Phillip," said his father.

Bethancourt looked up and said lightly, "Yes, were you looking for me?" but inwardly he cringed. His father was wearing his serious mien, which meant it was probably time for a discussion of Bethancourt's career choices and why he hadn't taken any of them up. He shifted in the deep leather armchair and fixed his glasses more firmly on his nose.

"Yes." Robert Bethancourt moved into the library, switching on the desk lamp but not sitting at once. "Margaret rang the other day. She was rather concerned about you."

Bethancourt raised an eyebrow. This was a new tack; the only concern his sister usually had about him was that she couldn't introduce him as "my brother, the surgeon," or "my brother, the barrister," or, better yet, "my brother, the ambassador" since that would mean she would rarely have to introduce him at all and could merely refer to him.

"She said," continued his father, "that you'd been investing in art."

A new tack indeed. Automatically Bethancourt ran through his more recent ventures although he knew there was nothing remotely artistic in any of



them. Even if there had been, he had never discussed his finances with his sister.

"I don't quite see what she could have been referring to," he answered.

His father, leaning on the back of the desk chair, regarded him severely. "Did you not buy a painting at a Sotheby auction?" he demanded.

"Ah." The light dawned. "Yes, I did. But I'd hardly call it an investment. I mean, I suppose it will appreciate over time, but there's really no telling . . ." He let his voice trail off at the look on his father's face.

"I don't like to credit Margaret's assumptions," he said, "but if she—really, Phillip, you must see that this kind of thing doesn't do."

Bethancourt stared at him, confused. Certainly his father couldn't be referring to the collecting of art in general. "I don't understand," he said. "Exactly what did Margaret assume?"

His father let his gaze drop to the desktop and made a moue of distaste. "That your girlfriend had provided the funds. Taken one step further, I'm sure you can see what that implies. And I won't have it, Phillip."

Bethancourt gaped at him. The idea that he was being kept by Marla was so ludicrous, so distant from anything that could possibly be true, that for a moment he simply couldn't assimilate it.

"Whatever gave Margaret an idea like that?" he burst out.

"It's not true, then?" Suspicion

warred with hope in his father's face.

"Of course it's not. It's utter rubbish."

Robert Bethancourt drew a deep breath and finally sat down. "But then where did you get the funds?" he asked. "You haven't come to me for money since you came down from Oxford and bought the Chelsea flat. Frankly, I'd been pleased that you were managing on your allowance—but we both know that doesn't run to this kind of expenditure."

Bethancourt was incredulous. "Surely," he said, "you haven't forgotten the capital Grandfather gave me when I reached my majority? It was a very sizable sum."

His father waved that away. "That was years ago," he said. "Seven or eight, as I recollect. There can't be much left of it, what with the cars and—"

This Bethancourt could hardly credit. "You can't think I simply spent it."

"Well," his father looked surprised, "what else? It's what it was for, after all."

Bethancourt rubbed his forehead. "I invested it," he said. "The original sum has doubled several times over since then. Quadrupled, whatever. I've spent a good deal of the proceeds, but the capital has never fallen below the original amount. It hasn't even gotten that low in a number of years."

His father was clearly astounded by this news. "Invested?" he said. "But you knew noth-

ing about investments when you came down. I didn't know you knew anything about them now."

"I studied up," answered Bethancourt, beginning to feel rather depressed. "I talked to Grandfather. I talked to brokers. I spent a lot of time following the market and looking into other ventures. I still do."

The astonishment on his father's face made the basis for his belief in Margaret's story clear. Bethancourt was the wastrel son, a dilettante who could never possibly spend any time or effort on anything but his own enjoyment, who doubtless expected the family fortune to support his lifestyle and, if that were not forthcoming, who was prepared to live off the earnings of his girlfriend, no doubt paying her off with his performance in bed.

Have you forgotten that I earned a first at Oxford, Father? he asked silently. You were so proud then. Have you really begun since then to see nothing but the façade of your own son?

He was suddenly unutterably weary. Aloud, he said, "I may not be very willing to take on new responsibilities, Father. But I do—I have always—managed to take care of those I already have."

"I'm sorry, Phillip," said his father at once. "I never really thought otherwise. As I said, I've been pleased that you managed so well on your allowance, that you've never come to me for more. But you see so much more of Margaret than you do of us that when she suggested—well, I

thought perhaps I didn't know you as well as I believed I did. People do change. And I really couldn't think where the money had come from. You see," he added rather shame-facedly, "I did spend what your grandfather gave me when I came down from Oxford. I thought of it as something to get me started in life rather than as something to last me through it."

Well, thought Bethancourt, perhaps his father did not think quite so badly of him as he had assumed. It was easy to assume that, given the same circumstances, your son would behave in the same way as yourself.

But his bitterness of moments ago was replaced by a white-hot rage at his sister for her unconscionable assumptions.

"I think I need a break," said Gibbons at breakfast the next morning. "I've been at it since seven this morning, and my brain is foggy."

"What you want is a nice tramp over the fells," said Bethancourt, sipping at his third cup of coffee, his sole morning sustenance. He had passed a restless night during which visions of Marla had persistently metamorphosed into visions of his sister. "I'll tell you what—we'll climb up to the moor and then work our way back down and have a pint at the pub. That'll blow the cobwebs out of your brain."

It was another perfect day, the morning air clear and sweet, the



white clouds scudding across the blue vault of the sky. They climbed vigorously, pausing periodically to admire the sweeping vistas below them.

In all, it was more than two hours later when at last they worked their way back down to the village and the pub. Gibbons felt rejuvenated and more than ready for his beer.

"It's a pity," he said as they entered the pub, "that there isn't country like this just outside Scotland Yard—a walk like that would help enormously when a case got to be too much."

Bethancourt, leading the way to the bar, agreed. He greeted the landlord cheerfully and ordered two pints of bitter. "It's almost lunchtime," he said, drinking deeply. "How would it be if we got something here? They've got quite good grub, and I'm feeling rather peckish."

"You should learn to eat breakfast," said Gibbons. "But all right. I admit that walk has given me a bit of an appetite."

As they made their way toward a table, Bethancourt suddenly paused. "Look over there," he said, "do you think that's our notorious lady author?"

"Who?" asked Gibbons.

"You remember—Miss James who has so upset the local worthies with her book on poverty-stricken people in Yorkshire."

"Oh," said Gibbons. "I suppose it might be."

The woman in question was sitting alone at a table by the window, writing in a dogeared

notebook. She was about their own age with thick corn-colored hair and wide blue eyes. From time to time she paused in her writing to sip at her beer and glance out the window. "Let's find out," said Bethancourt. Behind his glasses his hazel eyes were mischievous. "We can tell my mother about it later and enumerate all Miss James's virtues."

"What if she hasn't any?"

"Then we can make some up."

"It looks as though she's waiting for somebody," observed Gibbons as they crossed the room.

"Then we can keep her company until they show up. Excuse me," he continued as they reached their goal, "but I was wondering if you weren't Sally James, the author?"

The blue eyes gazed at him blankly. "Yes, I am," she said. "Do I know you?"

"No, but I wanted to say how interesting I found your last book. And we do have some mutual acquaintances. Namely, your landlords. As well as the Sturridges. I'm Phillip Bethancourt, and this is my houseguest, Jack Gibbons."

She smiled and shook hands. "I've heard of you," she said. "Or, rather, of your family. They live at Wethercross Grange, don't they? Do sit down. I was waiting for someone, but apparently he's not going to come."

"I'm surprised," said Bethancourt, dropping into a chair. "I shouldn't think many people stand you up."

She laughed. "He's not a very reliable sort, though he's been



very good about putting up with all my questions."

"We'd heard you were writing a new book here," said Gibbons. "Is this someone you've been interviewing?"

"That's right. His name's Tom Poots, although," she added in a sardonic tone, "I doubt if you know him."

"Of course I know Tom," protested Bethancourt. "We were boys together—or, rather, I was a very small boy and he was my idol. We gave him a lift into the village yesterday." Sally seemed rather nonplussed at this statement. "Actually," continued Bethancourt, "that might be why he hasn't shown up. His van had broken down, and he may not have got it put right yet."

"I'm surprised," she said. "I wouldn't have thought the Bethancourts would associate with the Pootses."

Bethancourt regarded her rather coolly. "My mother doesn't have them in to dinner, if that's what you mean," he said.

She ignored his tone. "No, I meant what you said about being boys together. Surely your mother didn't think he was an appropriate playmate?"

"No, she didn't," replied Bethancourt politely.

Gibbons was fascinated. He had never seen Bethancourt put on the upper-class glacial act; he hadn't imagined his gregarious friend capable of it.

Sally ploughed on, even in the face of this cool wind. "Dan Sturridge mentioned you as a boy-

hood friend," she said, "but he certainly doesn't know the Pootses."

The temperature Bethancourt was radiating dropped even further. "Possibly because Tom Poots and his father didn't spend their time poaching on the Sturridges' property. However, if you doubt what I've said, I can only suggest you ask Tom himself. It's unlikely he's forgotten the perfect pest I made of myself at age eight."

Sally looked stricken. "I didn't mean that," she said. "I'm sorry—I'm very interested in how social relationships work in the countryside, and I'm afraid I get carried away and ask the most tactless questions. Please don't think I meant anything offensive."

"I apologize," said Bethancourt, unbending. "I admit I took your remarks the wrong way. We were going to have a spot of lunch—won't you join us?"

"I'm afraid I can't," she answered, glancing at her watch. "I've got a lunchdate already, and I suppose I should be going. I've only waited this long in hopes Tom would turn up. But I do hope we meet again sometime."

"So do I," said Bethancourt.

"You scared her off," remarked Gibbons as they watched her leave.

Bethancourt waved a hand. "No, I didn't," he contradicted. "It takes more than a little frost to scare off someone like her. Come on, let's order something—I'm starving."

They took a different route home, Bethancourt leading the

way up over the fells along narrow paths. The day was warmer now, and with a good meal inside them, they went more slowly.

"There's Beck Cottage," said Bethancourt at one point. "Home of our troublesome author."

"That must be her lunchdate arriving," observed Gibbons, shading his eyes.

"Yes—oh dear."

Gibbons raised an eyebrow at his friend, who looked both amused and rueful. "Don't you recognize the car?" he said. "It's the same green Mercedes Dan Sturridge was driving last night."

Gibbons made a tsking sound. "And his wife pregnant, too."

Bethancourt turned away. "I really didn't want to know that," he said. "Now I won't be able to help thinking of it next time I see them."

"Maybe it's not as bad as it looks," suggested Gibbons, following his friend up the slope.

"Don't be ridiculous, Jack," said Bethancourt. "He's a barrister, and this is a workday. What other possible reason could he have for being there at this time of the afternoon?"

Indeed, as Gibbons glanced back over his shoulder, he saw Sally James emerge from the cottage to greet her guest, and there was no mistaking the passionate nature of the embrace they gave each other.

Coming up to the Grange had been a good idea, thought Gibbons the next morning as he laid aside his pencil and pushed away

the pad he'd been making notes on. The country air was both refreshing and soothing, and he was safer from interruptions here than he would have been in London. It was far less tempting for the Yard to call him back for anything but a real emergency when he was five hundred miles away rather than just round the corner.

However, he was beginning to feel slightly guilty about Bethancourt. His friend had issued the invitation quite casually, but Gibbons was aware that he was here as a kind of moral support for whatever emotional crisis Bethancourt was undergoing. And thus far he hadn't done much in that role; he hadn't even yet wormed the whole story out of his friend.

Stretching, he moved to the window and leaned out, looking down at the small stoneflagged terrace below. Bethancourt hadn't been down to breakfast, but he thought he heard his voice now, interspersed with that of a woman's. Yes, there he was, sitting beside a woman Gibbons did not recognize but who seemed to be riveting Bethancourt's attention. Curious, Gibbons abandoned his police manual and went down.

Bethancourt turned as Gibbons emerged from the house. His friend's pallor led Gibbons to deduce that he had drunk a good deal of the bottle of whisky they had opened after dinner the night before.

"Jack, I'm glad you've come," said Bethancourt seriously. "This is Sarah Poots—you remember



her husband, Tom. We met him on the road the other day."

"Of course. How do you do?" Gibbons studied the woman before him. She was thin, clearly dressed in her Sunday best, with a careworn face at the moment ravaged by tears.

"Now, Jack here is a real detective from Scotland Yard," said Bethancourt, "so you can see we'll soon have this business sorted out. You leave it to me, Mrs. Poots. I'll go down straightaway and call on you on my way back."

"Thank you, Mr. Bethancourt." Sarah Poots wiped her nose and sniffed. "It's been that big a shock, I didn't know what to do."

She rose and Bethancourt rose with her, murmuring more assurances as he walked her down the terrace steps and through the garden. He took leave of her at the bottom of the lawn and then stood looking after her as she disappeared into the trees.

"What's up?" asked Gibbons, a trifle uneasily. The mention of his official standing had alarmed him though he did not show it. Whatever had happened, he had no jurisdiction here, as the Yorkshire C.I.D. would be the first to point out.

"It's very serious," answered Bethancourt, lighting a cigarette and gulping at the mug of coffee he had retained in his hand throughout. "Sally James has been murdered, Jack. And the police have taken up Tom Poots for it."

Gibbons stared at him. "But we just saw her yesterday," he protested, as if this would pre-

vent her having been murdered in the ensuing twenty-four hours. "When did this happen?"

"Sarah wasn't sure," said Bethancourt. "In fact, Sarah knows hardly anything, aside from the fact that when the police arrived Tom seemed far more nervous than usual—"

"Than usual?" Gibbons raised his eyebrows.

Bethancourt grinned. "I told you about his poaching habits. Anyway, Sarah couldn't understand his alarm until the police announced he was wanted to assist them with their inquiries into Sally James's death. She started to say more and then stopped—I think, though, what upset her most was that Tom didn't seem surprised at the news."

Gibbons' brows lifted even higher. "And yet you've assured her you'll see to it?"

"She came looking for my father, of course," said Bethancourt, "only he's gone off to York for the day. But, yes, I intend looking into it for her. The least I can do is see what sort of case the police have and get Tom a solicitor if he needs one."

"I see." Gibbons rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Do you think he's done it?"

"God knows," answered Bethancourt. "I wouldn't have thought Tom capable of murder, but for all we know he was a witness, not the perpetrator. Come on, we'll drive down to Skipton now and sort things out."

"I've really come on behalf of



Mr. Poots's wife," said Bethancourt soothingly to Detective Inspector Burgess, who was not best pleased to be faced with a magistrate's son and a detective sergeant from New Scotland Yard. "I don't mean to interfere at all, but if you really contemplate charging Tom, I think his wife should be prepared for the news."

Burgess eyed Gibbons, who smiled faintly back. "Well," he said at last, "since you'll only get it out of your father as soon as he gets back, I suppose there's no harm in telling you. Yes, we do contemplate charging him."

"Ah," said Bethancourt, and, as it became clear that no more was forthcoming, "just so. As you so astutely observed, inspector, I'll have the whole story from my father by this evening—would it really hurt to just sketch me an outline of the case?"

Burgess considered, his eye straying once again to Gibbons, who appeared, in Burgess's mind at least, to be a kind of talisman for trustworthiness.

"I suppose I could," he said gruffly. "But, mind, it's to go no further. Miss James was killed with a shotgun between three and seven yesterday afternoon. At about five Mrs. Willets saw Tom Poots's van driving up the lane to Beck Cottage. She also saw it returning about half an hour later, driving very fast. Poots at first claimed he was nowhere near the place but has since admitted he did go up there. Says he'd had an appoint-

ment with Miss James that morning that he'd missed on account of his van's being out of commission, and that once it was fixed, he went up to explain his absence to Miss James. He says she wasn't there and he waited a few minutes and then came back. His shotgun is missing, and he claims it was stolen from his van two days ago when it broke down and he left it in a lay-by on the Appletreewick road."

"Well, all that's true enough," said Bethancourt. "I mean about the van breaking down and his appointment with Miss James. Jack and I saw her in the New Inn yesterday, and she said she'd been waiting for him."

Interest gleamed in Burgess's eye. "You saw her, then, sir?"

"Yes, about noon, wasn't it, Jack? We sat with her for a few minutes, but then she said she had a lunchdate and left. But, inspector, have you any idea why Tom would want to kill her?"

"Not yet," admitted Burgess. "But I imagine it had to do with this book she's writing. That's what she's been talking to Poots about—they've met several times over the past few weeks. No doubt he told her more about his activities than was wise, without realizing she meant to put it all down in black and white. When he found out, well, you can see where it might lead."

"Uh, yes," Bethancourt frowned.

"Did she mention who she was having lunch with, sir? Or where?" asked Burgess. "We didn't know about the lunchdate."

Gibbons watched Bethancourt struggle with his conscience. To his friend's credit, the struggle was brief. "She didn't say," answered Bethancourt, "but I know. As we were walking back over the fell, we looked down at Beck Cottage just as her guest was arriving and I recognized him. It was Daniel Sturridge. From the welcome she gave him," he added uncomfortably, "I rather think they've been having an affair."

Burgess's eyebrows rose. "Well, well," he said, "fancy that. I take it you know Mr. Sturridge, sir?"

"Yes," admitted Bethancourt with a sigh.

"And would you know if he possessed a shotgun?"

"I imagine so," said Bethancourt reluctantly. "In any case, his father does. They have shooting parties occasionally during the season."

"Of course," murmured Burgess, stroking his chin, his eyes alight with consideration of this new angle. "Well, we'll certainly wish to speak to Mr. Sturridge. Yes, a conversation with him might be quite interesting." He smiled. "It seems unlikely, but it is just possible that Mr. Poots is telling the truth. Thank you very much, sir."

"Good God!" said Bethancourt bitterly, slamming shut the door of the Jaguar with a violence that made Cerberus jump in the back seat. "That turned out well, didn't it?"

"You knew you'd probably have to tell them about Dan going in,"

said Gibbons gently. "Don't tell me you'd forgotten him."

"No," admitted Bethancourt. "It was the first thing I thought of this morning when Sarah came up. But I was truly hoping it wouldn't be pertinent. I need a drink, and it's long past lunch-time—let's find a pub. And, oh hell, I've forgotten to ring the solicitor. Well, I can do that from the pub as well. I tell you, Jack, I'd give a lot not to have known about Dan and Sally to begin with."

"Then you think it's more likely to be him than Tom Poots?" asked Gibbons while Bethancourt let in the clutch and sped out of the car park.

"I don't know," he answered. "Dan's certainly got more motive. I don't believe for a moment Burgess's idea that Tom told Sally more than he meant to. He may not have the best education, but he's not a stupid man. And in any case Sally would be disguising everything she learned. She'd never get anyone to talk to her if she wasn't—the book's supposed to be a novel, after all."

"True enough," agreed Gibbons. "But we don't know what sort of relationship Tom had with Sally. There might have been something else."

"Yes." Bethancourt paused and slackened speed. "But I bet I can guess who does know all about Tom and Sally. At least it's a thought—we'll drop in on him on our way back."

"Who?" asked Gibbons.

"Bob Bailey, Tom's partner in



crime. If Sally was talking to poachers, she must have at least tried to talk to Bob as well. And if she came recommended by Tom, there's a good chance Bob went along with it."

Bob Bailey, according to his wife, was out with the sheep. Bethancourt drove the Jaguar as far up the narrow track as he could, and then they took to their feet, Cerberus trotting sedately alongside while above them on the hill sheep congregated, moved briskly ever closer together by the black speck of the sheepdog circling their flanks.

Bailey greeted them quietly, only his eyes betraying any surprise at their coming to find him out on the hillside.

"Have you heard about Tom?" asked Bethancourt, who this time had refrained from introducing Gibbons as a detective.

Bailey looked aggrieved. "Now, I'll tell you straight," he said, "I don't have that old shotgun of his, and I never did. As if I'd borrow a thing from him without letting him know. And even if I had, I'd give it back, whether it was better than mine or no."

"Oh, so Tom thought you'd taken it," said Bethancourt.

"Round here last night about it, he was," said Bailey.

"What time, Bob?"

Bailey looked suspicious. "After supper it were," he answered. "Seven or it might be eight o'clock."

Bethancourt sighed. "I wish he'd come earlier."

"What's all this about then?"

demanded Bailey. "If you haven't come about the gun, what's the trouble?"

"Sally James has been murdered," Bethancourt told him, "and the police have arrested Tom for it."

Bailey was clearly shocked. He stared at Bethancourt for several seconds and then looked to Gibbons for confirmation.

"Ah, hell," he said at last, and spit. "I told Tom that woman'd be trouble. But he was that infatuated, he couldn't see it."

"Infatuated?" repeated Bethancourt sharply. "There wasn't anything between them, surely?"

Bailey snorted. "No, but that don't stop a man from dreaming, do it? He fair drooled over her every word. Sickening sight. I put up a fuss about taking her—"

Abruptly he cut himself off, but Bethancourt smiled. "So that's it, is it?" he asked softly. "You and Tom took her poaching with you."

"Poaching? I don't know what you mean." For all Bailey's outdoor heartiness, the look of offended innocence on his face was identical to the look Gibbons had seen often before on the faces of career criminals in London.

"Now, Bob," said Bethancourt, "we're not policemen, and when it's a case of Tom being charged with murder, I'm not going to go on about a bit of poaching, even if it was up at my father's place."

"Well, it wasn't," retorted Bailey, glancing uneasily at Gibbons. "We took her down to the Nelly Park Wood if you want to know."



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"When was this?"

"A week or two ago. I didn't half like it, I can tell you, but Tom insisted. And she was a good sort, I'll give her that. Kept out of the way and only laughed when she saw how worried I was and said as how she was writing fiction and it would all be set somewhere else. Nobody'd ever know, she said, and she'd be in as much trouble as us if it came out. I still didn't like it, but Tom seemed sure of her. And nowt came of it, to be sure."

"Tell me, Mr. Bailey," interjected Gibbons, "if Tom was so infatuated with Sally, would he have been upset to learn she was having an affair with someone else?"

Bailey shrugged. "What else could he expect? No, he wasn't fooling himself into thinking she'd ever have him, if that's what you mean. And if you're trying to say he'd have killed her because of some other fellow, all I can say is, if he was that far gone—which he wasn't—he'd be more like to kill the man than her."

"All right, Bob, thanks," said Bethancourt. "You've been a help, and I promise not to put the police onto you if I can help it. Here—get yourself a drink once you're done up here."

They turned and made their way back down the hill. Gibbons hunched into his jacket; it had been another glorious day, but the wind that raced over the hillside was chill.

"Well, that gives Tom a motive,

despite Bailey's disclaimer," he said.

"Only if he knew about Dan, and I don't see how he could have," answered Bethancourt.

"Dan might still have been there when he arrived," suggested Gibbons. "Tom waits, not wanting to interrupt, and sees Sally giving him a passionate goodbye. Once Dan's gone, Tom goes in to confront Sally about the whole thing."

"Unlikely," said Bethancourt. "Yesterday was a working day, remember? Dan might have taken a long lunch, but I doubt he got the whole afternoon off. He'd have been long gone by the time Tom got up there. But . . ." His voice trailed off as they reached the car and settled themselves in. Bethancourt reversed carefully and started down the bumpy track.

"But what?" asked Gibbons at last. "You had a thought back there."

"It's not a pleasant one," said Bethancourt. "I was just wondering about Sarah Poots. It was clear from what she said this morning that she didn't like Sally James, and I thought then that it was just an effect of the trouble her death was causing. But if Sarah knew about Tom's infatuation—and she well might have, women always *do* seem to know—well, she might have taken matters into her own hands."

"It's something to consider," agreed Gibbons. "We're going to see her now, aren't we? We can at least find out what she was doing yesterday afternoon."



Sarah claimed to have gone over to a neighbor's for tea, taking advantage of the fact that Tom was stuck at home, working on the van, and could therefore watch the children. This of course was no kind of alibi at all, though Bethancourt carefully refrained from letting any disappointment show on his face.

It was nearly dinnertime when they got back to the Grange, and a storm awaited them there. Bethancourt's mother came into the hall to greet them as they arrived.

"The most incredible thing has happened," she said. "I do wish your father weren't always away when a crisis develops, and you seem to be taking after him, Phillip."

"What is it, Mother?"

"It's this Sally James matter," replied Ellen, neatly avoiding the word "murder." "Mary Sturridge rang earlier—apparently the police have taken Dan in for questioning. I cannot imagine what they're thinking of. He hardly knew the woman, for heaven's sake."

"I'm afraid that's not true, Mother," said Bethancourt, turning into the sitting room. "He and Sally were having an affair."

Ellen gaped but recovered her poise swiftly. "He told you this?" she asked incredulously.

"No, of course not," answered Bethancourt, pouring himself and Gibbons a drink at the sideboard. "Do you want anything, Mother?"

"No," she answered automatically. "Phillip, how on earth could

you know such a thing? You haven't been here a week yet."

"Jack and I saw them as we were walking back from Apple-treewick," Bethancourt answered, crossing to hand Gibbons his drink and disposing of half his own at one gulp.

Ellen's eyes narrowed. "You mean you were spying—"

"Certainly not," said Bethancourt sharply. "We were up on the fell, and I pointed the cottage out to Jack, that's all. And while we were looking, Dan came driving up and received an unmistakable sort of greeting from Sally. I'm sorry, Mother, but it's true."

But Ellen's thoughts had moved on. "Phillip, it wasn't *you* who told the police this, was it?"

"I had to, Mother."

"No, you did not." Ellen's voice was frosty. "I cannot think what's come over you, Phillip. How could you cast suspicion on Dan Sturridge? One of your oldest friends! Why, your grandfather nearly married Ethel Sturridge—"

"Mother," said Bethancourt, trying vainly to stem the tide, "you must see that Dan—"

"Has behaved very badly," interrupted Ellen. "I certainly admit that, but it's no business of ours and you're not one to take the high moral ground, not with that model of yours! The idea that Dan could possibly have committed murder is ludicrous."

Gibbons was slowly backing away with the idea of escaping before his influence on Bethancourt, as a policeman, could be brought up. But just as he had



reached the door, it opened behind him, and Robert Bethancourt came in. He took in the situation at a glance and said mildly, "What's all this, then? Has something happened?"

"Phillip has behaved disgracefully," answered his wife, "I swear I don't know what we're to do with him. He must get these ideas in London, from the kind of people he associates with there."

"Ellen, please," said Robert, with an apologetic glance at Gibbons. "Phillip, what exactly has happened?"

Bethancourt's explanation was interrupted several times by his mother, who had a great deal to say about the Pootses and misplaced loyalties, but eventually Robert heard the whole story. He shook his head. "That's bad," he said, "very bad."

"It could have been avoided if Phillip had merely held his tongue," snapped Ellen.

"No, Ellen," said Robert firmly. "He had to say what he knew. It was his plain duty."

"But they already had Tom Poots—"

"Ellen!" said Robert, raising his voice. "That is quite beyond the point, and you know it. If Dan did this horrible thing, it would be most unjust to let Tom Poots take the blame."

"But you know perfectly well Dan didn't do it."

Robert looked thoughtful. "No, I don't," he said. "Quite frankly," he added grimly, "I never would have thought Dan would take up with another woman while his

wife . . . well, I'm sure you agree with me that it's quite indecent."

Ellen's answer was lost to Gibbons as he retired quietly from the room.

Bethancourt found him in the library a few minutes later.

"I think, if you don't mind, we'll go out to dinner," he said. "Father's put his foot down, but Mother's still quite unhappy and I don't fancy being glowered at over the roast chicken."

"It's fine with me," said Gibbons, who thought Bethancourt would not be the only one glowered at. "Where shall we go?"

"I don't know—we'll get in the car and see what we feel like. But let's go now, before Mother realizes we've left."

In the end they returned to Boudelman's, which had the virtue of being nearby. The prices there were considerably more than Gibbons could afford, but Bethancourt insisted that Gibbons was a guest and therefore not liable for his own meals.

"Lord," said Bethancourt, picking at his salad gloomily, "what a mess." Gibbons looked up, uncertain if Bethancourt was referring to the case or his food.

"It's enough," continued Bethancourt, "to make a man swear off relationships altogether."

"Thinking about Marla again?" asked Gibbons.

"Oh. That." Bethancourt poked at the lettuce listlessly. "Well, at least I can say that, whatever our problems, I've never considered picking up a shotgun and blowing her head off."

“You’re not the type,” said Gibbons with assurance. He hesitated and then went on, “What problems, exactly? I mean, you said she wanted to get a flat in Paris, but I don’t see what’s wrong with that. She’s away quite often as it is.”

Bethancourt sighed and abandoned his salad altogether, pushing the plate back as he picked up his wine. “It’s what it’s all leading to,” he answered. “We had a talk when she got back from New York last week.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Not what I expected.”

In the intervening week since their phone conversation, he had thought of half a dozen ways to manipulate Marla into staying in England and maintaining the status quo but had abandoned them all in the realization that he had no right to interfere with her career plans unless he wished to offer her a new life, which he was by no means certain he wanted to do. In fact, by the end of the week he found himself strangely calm about her return, despite his certainty that when he saw her again the end of the relationship would be in sight. There were even moments when what he felt amounted almost to relief, though there were others when he was furious with her and knew that his pride, if nothing else, was badly wounded. In any case, he drew the line at assisting at his own demise. The trip to Paris was definitely out.

But she had greeted him enthusiastically, and he was surprised that he could detect nothing

different in her manner toward him. During dinner at the busy bistro in the Royal Hospital Road, however, he was reminded of his surmise by her happy chatter about her time in New York. And when she mentioned Paris, he said, “I may not be able to go next week. I’ll have to let you know.”

“That’s all right.” She shrugged. “There’s no hurry. Actually, I’ve been thinking that over.”

“Change your mind?” he asked.

“No. But I wondered . . .” She hesitated with charming and wholly uncharacteristic diffidence. Here it comes, thought Bethancourt. She’s decided she can’t stick it out with me for another fortnight and is going to brave Paris with her own execrable French.

“Yes?” he said aloud with, he thought, a fine carelessness.

Marla tilted her head. “I wondered if you’d like to find a flat there, too.”

Bethancourt was so dumbfounded that at first he simply stared at her. He barely prevented himself from blurting out, “What would I want with a flat in Paris?” Instead he sipped his wine to give himself a moment to think.

“I hadn’t considered that,” he said carefully. “Frankly, it hadn’t occurred to me that you would want me there.”

Marla raised an eyebrow. “Why ever not?” she said.

“Well, you never have before.”

“That was different,” she told him. “I’ll be spending more time there now.”

“Yes, I know. Let me think about it, all right, love? The idea’s so new, I need to get used to it.”

Marla smiled and nodded.

Gibbons pushed away his empty salad plate. “So how did you feel once it sank in?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” answered Bethancourt. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so entirely wrong about someone in my whole life.”

“Well, did you still want to break up with her?”

“I don’t know that, either,” admitted Bethancourt. “I might just have laughed off my mistake in the ordinary way of things, but don’t you see that she’s raised the stakes? She’s planning a major change in her life, and she’s asking me to go along, which entails a major change in our relationship as well. If all goes well with her, then in another year or so it will mean a move to New York. If we’re to continue the relationship, then either she will have to give up her career goals or I will have to give up my life in London.”

“Well, do you want to move to New York?” asked Gibbons practically.

“No,” answered Bethancourt. “But the real question is how I feel about Marla. I’m embarrassed to admit that for all the time we’ve been together, I’ve never once thought about whether I would want to settle down with her someday. And now that I am thinking about it, I find I don’t know.”

“Perhaps you’re just not ready to settle down.”

“Perhaps I’m just not ready to settle down with Marla—and never will be.”

“Surely,” said Gibbons, “there’s no need for this all-or-nothing approach. Yes, it will come to that in the end, but you’ve got time yet to make up your mind. All you’ve really got to decide right now is whether or not you want to continue on for the moment.”

“Ah,” said Bethancourt, leaning back. “You mean I should go along with her for the moment, giving her the distinct impression that I am fully committed to taking the relationship to the next level, and decide whether or not I actually am committed later.”

“Good Lord, Phillip,” said Gibbons. “You really have worked yourself into a state over this. Even if you were panting to move to New York, there’s a fifty percent chance that, once you were involved, things would fall apart. For all you know, Marla won’t be happy with the new arrangement either. My advice to you is to step back and take a deep breath.”

“Your pheasant, sir,” said the waiter, deftly removing the salad plates and substituting the entrees. “And the grouse for you, sir. Will that be all?”

“Yes, thank you—it looks delicious.”

The arrival of the main course seemed to cheer Bethancourt. He tasted judiciously, pronounced favorably, and then firmly steered the conversation back to the James murder. “There is abso-

lutely nothing else we can do," said Gibbons. "I know it was difficult, but by providing the information about Dan Sturridge, you've done what any good witness should do. And that's all we are in this matter."

Bethancourt's eyes glinted. "Don't you want to know who killed her?"

"Of course. And no doubt I'll find out once the Yorkshire C.I.D. have charged somebody."

"We've come up with two different motives so far," mused Bethancourt. "Fear of something she discovered while researching her book, and passion. Passion's a bit hard to investigate, but it might be very interesting to have a look at however much she's written of the book. Or the notes she's made along the way."

"I have no doubt the local C.I.D. are finding it fascinating," said Gibbons stubbornly.

"My father might be able to help there," said Bethancourt, ignoring him. "And do you know, if the motive was something in the book, it could be someone else altogether. One of the Warburtons, for example, because she'd exposed them as terrible landlords."

"Phillip," said Gibbons gently, "I understand that you want to clear your friends—I would, too. But don't you think there's enough on our plates with the two suspects we've got?"

"Hello, Mr. Bethancourt. I'm pleased to see you back so soon. Everything satisfactory?" It was Boudelman, making his rounds.

"Excellent," replied Bethan-

court. He indicated his plate. "This sauce—there's something in it I can't quite place."

A gleam of true interest replaced the assumed sparkle in Boudelman's eye. "You're a gourmand, perhaps? Well, the sauce is something of my own . . ."

In moments they were deep in a culinary discussion, which only came to an end when a waiter discreetly summoned Boudelman back to his kitchen. Gibbons listened with only half an ear; he appreciated good food but had very little interest in how it got that way.

"Yes, this place should do well," said Bethancourt when Boudelman had left. "You can tell with all this effort at camaraderie that Boudelman's still worried about it—I'll bet once he's really made a go of it you won't see him wandering round the dining room any more."

"Probably not," agreed Gibbons. "He's only really interested in the food. I could see the change in his manner as soon as you started getting down to the nuts and bolts of the business."

Bethancourt shrugged. "All really good chefs are like that."

"Oh, hullo, Phillip."

Dan Sturridge emerged slowly from his car, refusing to meet Bethancourt's eyes.

"Hello," answered Bethancourt, reclosing the door of the Jaguar and feeling as awkward as Sturridge looked. "I heard they'd released you last night."

"I rather wish they hadn't,"



said Sturridge. "I was up all night with Cathy—not that I blame her, of course. She's every right to be upset." He stared down at his shoes. "She's kicked me out this morning."

"Um," said Bethancourt. "I'm sorry. I always imagined you and Cathy to be very happy together."

"We were," protested Sturridge.

"Then why were you such a chump?" His own frustration with the part he had been forced to play burst out in this comment, and he added hastily, "I'm sorry, Dan. I know you must be feeling like hell, and I don't mean to make it worse."

But Sturridge seemed almost eager to explain, no doubt because his explanations had not been much heeded at home. "I never meant to hurt Cathy," he said. "But, well, in some ways I guess I wasn't really ready to be a father. Cathy wanted to start a family, and it seemed like the right time—I mean, my career was going well, and she and I had been married two years. But then once she actually got pregnant, well, I told you the other night it's been rough on her. She was too tired to go out at night, or away at the weekend, and suddenly I realized that it wouldn't be any different once the baby came, it'd only get worse. It just all seemed so, well, *dull*. And then I met Sally and she seemed so alive, so interesting. It wasn't a grand passion. I knew it was wrong at the time, but I told myself Cathy need never know. It was stupid, really." His gaze fi-

nally lifted to meet Bethancourt's. "But I didn't kill Sally, Phillip. Even if she'd threatened to tell Cathy—which she didn't—I would never have done that."

"I didn't think you had," said Bethancourt mildly, but he thought to himself that the rather smug man he had always known had been destroyed and wondered what Sturridge might have done to prevent that destruction, had he seen it coming.

Sturridge glanced toward the house. "I just came to thank your father," he said. "Dad said he was taking an interest in getting the whole thing cleared up."

More likely you're avoiding a scene with your parents, thought Bethancourt. "I'm afraid you've missed him," he said aloud. "He's gone down to the police station to look into things, but I shouldn't think he'd be long. You're welcome to wait—Annie will get you a cup of tea."

"I need a drink more."

"At ten o'clock in the morning?" said Bethancourt. "Well, perhaps you do, at that. I'm just on my way out, but go on into the study and make yourself at home. Uh, my mother's about somewhere, but she's not likely to go into the study."

Sturridge looked downcast. "I suppose she's disgusted with me."

"Well," replied Bethancourt, "I don't know as I'd want to meet her just now if I were you. Let her temper cool off a bit first."

"Yes, all right. Thanks, Phillip."

Bethancourt nodded and slid behind the wheel of the Jaguar.

He hadn't really much sympathy for Sturridge, but the man's story did go to show where making commitments you weren't ready for could lead. And he felt a nagging guilt that it was his words which had put Sturridge in his present position; in fact, he had been half afraid when he saw the car coming up the drive that Sturridge had come to berate him for his betrayal. If Sturridge had, in fact, murdered his mistress, then one could hardly look on it as betrayal, of course, but if Sturridge were innocent, despite all that experience had taught Bethancourt of the police's need, to know everything about a murder victim, he still felt he had played the traitor, however illogical it might be.

Meanwhile, Dan Sturridge was not the only one the police had released. Bethancourt's solicitor had effected Tom Poots's freedom as well, and Bethancourt wanted to see him. He had been certain at first that Poots must be innocent, but the idea that he had been infatuated with Sally changed everything. Passion could warp a man's mind wonderfully.

Poots answered the door himself. He appeared none the worse for his ordeal, and he nodded to Bethancourt as he ushered him in.

"Thanks for sending that solicitor fellow along," he said. "They'd have kept me longer else."

"I know." Bethancourt sat down and offered Poots a cigarette before lighting one himself.

Poots inhaled deeply, and his dark eyes met Bethancourt's frankly. "I'm for it this time, aren't I?"

"I don't know, Tom," answered Bethancourt. "It doesn't look good at the moment, but there is at least one other suspect. Dan Sturridge was having an affair with Sally James."

Poots snorted. "Oh, aye," he said. "And d'you think they'll really hang him instead of me?"

"They're not going to hang anyone," said Bethancourt firmly. He was oddly encouraged by the fact that Poots had thus far not felt it necessary to declare his innocence—something he invariably did when he was guilty.

"Manner o' speaking." Poots shrugged.

"Will you tell me what happened?" asked Bethancourt.

"I went up after I'd got the van fixed," said Poots readily. "I'd been supposed to meet her that morning, and I didn't want her thinking I'd just stood her up, casual like. I got there and her car was outside and there was a light in the cottage."

Bethancourt frowned. "A light? Surely it wasn't dark yet, not at this time of year."

"No, but the shadows come over early there, and the cottage is dark enough at the best of times. Any road, I knocked and got no answer, so I thought perhaps she was just out looking the garden over or summat. I went round but there weren't no sign of her, so I knocked again."

He paused, eyeing Bethan-



court as if to determine his trustworthiness.

"Well, I suppose I'd best tell you," he said at last. "I didn't see where else she would have gone without her car and leaving lights on, so I just had a peep in the sitting room windows."

"And?" said Bethancourt encouragingly.

"She were there, right enough," said Poots slowly. "I could see her clear on the floor, all covered in blood. It gave me a bad turn, it did. Took a minute to sink in. Then I tried the door. It was open, but as soon as I came in, I could see she was dead, and then I realized what a bad spot I was in. So I came away, fast as I could."

"I'm sorry," said Bethancourt. "I didn't know you'd found her." He considered. "I don't expect you told the police this?" he asked dryly.

Poots shook his head indignantly, as if he had been accused of an indiscretion. "No," he answered. "Nor that fancy solicitor either."

Bethancourt sighed. It was pointless to rebuke Poots for not having told all he knew. "What time was this, do you know?" he asked.

"Reckon I got up there about five."

Bethancourt had no more doubts about Poots's innocence. If he had killed Sally himself, he would never have claimed to have found her body. He was crafty enough, but his mind did not work in quite so devious a fashion. Bethancourt's suspi-

cions of Sarah arose with renewed vigor, but he pushed the thought from his mind. "You'll have to tell the police, Tom," said Bethancourt. "This is important," he added in response to Poots's negative reaction. "It narrows down the time when the murder could have been committed."

"Only if you believe me," said Poots. "Look here, I know you mean well, but you ain't had the experience I've had with the police. If I say I saw her dead, they'll only think I killed her."

Bethancourt shook his head. "They already think that," he pointed out. "This won't make it any worse."

Poots looked unconvinced.

"What about your shotgun?" asked Bethancourt. "Bob Bailey said you thought he'd taken it."

Poots spread his hands. "If he didn't, I don't know who did. It was in the back of the van like always that day you picked me up. I didn't miss it till the next morning when I got her towed back here."

"But the van wasn't broken into, was it?"

"Well," admitted Poots, "you wouldn't have to. That passenger side door doesn't work quite right. But the gun wasn't lying out—you'd have to know to look for it, which is why I thought it was Bob."

"But if the van was there all night, anybody who passed by and recognized it could have stolen the shotgun."

Poots nodded glumly.

"Well," said Bethancourt, ris-

ing, "we'll see what we can sort out. I'll speak to the solicitor again and see what he thinks. Don't worry, Tom; it's not quite as bleak as you think."

He stopped at a roadside pub for his lunch in order to avoid both his mother and Dan Sturridge. The former was still eyeing him coldly this morning, and while he didn't suppose Sturridge had the slightest inkling of who had betrayed his secret, Bethancourt still felt awkward in his presence.

On his return to the Grange he found Sturridge gone and his father and Gibbons in the study, poring over Bethancourt's laptop computer. "I didn't think you'd mind," said Gibbons. "The police gave your father a copy of Sally's files, but there's no computer in the house."

"It all seems very dull so far," added Robert. "Plot outlines and that kind of thing."

"Any notes of whom she'd spoken to?" asked Bethancourt, pulling up a chair. "Or was that all in her notebook?"

"They didn't find a notebook," answered Robert. "The murderer had definitely made an effort to get rid of everything she'd written. All the files on her computer had been deleted, but apparently she had a second drive attached—I think the inspector called it a zip although that sounds very unlikely to me."

"No, that's right," said Bethancourt. "It's a backup drive in case your computer unexpectedly dies

on you. Don't tell me the killer didn't take those disks as well?"

"No," said his father, "that's the odd thing. There was a disk in this second drive, and it was left intact."

"Perhaps the murderer didn't recognize it," said Gibbons. "Zip drives don't look like anything much—he might not have realized what it was."

"If that's the case, it certainly lets Dan Sturridge out," said Robert. "I understand from his father that he's the computer whiz in the office. He's set up a lot of new things for them."

"It also lets out Tom Poots," said Bethancourt, mentally including Sarah as well. "I doubt he'd even know how to turn a computer on, much less how to find and delete all her files."

His father nodded. "I'm not sure it would even occur to Tom to look at the computer."

Gibbons kept silent, although he agreed with neither statement. It seemed to him perfectly possible that in the adrenaline-charged moments after a murder even one well-versed in computers might have overlooked a zip drive. And while he was willing to admit that Poots probably knew little about such machines, computers were undeniably in the public consciousness these days and deleting files was a fairly simple project. Poots might well have picked up enough from films and magazines to do the job.

"In any case," he said, "the destruction of her files doesn't narrow the motive down. There's a

journal on here as well, chronicling her personal life."

"Anything interesting?" asked Bethancourt, settling back in his chair and lighting a cigarette.

"Well," admitted Gibbons, "we haven't actually looked at that yet."

"Whyever—oh, never mind, let's look at it now."

"I'll leave you to it," said his father, rising. "I admit to being more than normally interested, but there are things I'm actually supposed to be doing."

"It was awfully good of you to get this for us," said Bethancourt.

Robert waved a hand and left.

"He didn't like the idea of reading someone else's journal," said Gibbons after the door had closed behind him. "God knows it's not how I was brought up, either, but in a murder investigation . . ."

"Yes, well, the older generation's sensibilities are more delicate," said Bethancourt, leaning forward to click open the file. "If there's any light to be shed, it'll be in here."

But there was nothing. They spent the rest of the afternoon reading every entry but learned very little more than they had before. Indeed, Bethancourt came to sympathize with his father, for there were pages and pages devoted to Sally's affair with Daniel Sturridge, some of it quite graphic. He tried to pretend that he didn't know these people, but the self-deception did not work very well.

"Hell," he said at one passage.

"I wonder if Marla keeps a journal like this. I hope not."

"I hope I never have to read it if she does," said Gibbons.

There was a detailed account of the night Tom Poots had taken her poaching, and he was mentioned elsewhere, but there was nothing to indicate she had realized that he was infatuated with her.

The journal ended with an entry written the day before her murder in which she noted the rendezvous set with Sturridge for the next afternoon.

"But she doesn't put down the appointment with Poots," said Bethancourt thoughtfully. "In fact, as an account of her movements, this is nearly useless. Look here—" he scrolled back a few pages—"there's a gap of several days between this dinner with Dan and the next entry about the vet."

"Well, it was hardly likely it would be very helpful," said Gibbons. "If it was, the police would already be onto someone." He paused thoughtfully while Bethancourt glared at him. "I don't like to mention it," he went on in a moment, "but in the book outline your father and I looked at, there's mention of a character—the son of a leading family—who is having an affair while his wife is pregnant."

"Oh," said Bethancourt, a little bleakly. "Well, perhaps Dan didn't know about it."

"Perhaps. But if he did—"

"Well, here, let *me* look at it," said Bethancourt impatiently, as if by reading it he could render it innocuous.

He was still looking at the outline when the call to dinner came. "Into the breach," he said, sighing. "I hope Mother's gotten over her pique, but I wouldn't bet on it."

"She seemed all right at lunch," offered Gibbons.

"I wasn't there then," said Bethancourt glumly.

The clock on the nightstand showed three A.M. when Bethancourt gave up his unequal struggle with sleep and rose, wrapping himself in his dressing gown and seeking out the liquor cabinet downstairs. With a tumblerful of single malt whisky, he lit a cigarette and wandered back into his father's study, where he had left the computer after dinner. By now the only files he hadn't read were the ones containing the actual novel itself, and it was doubtful that anything relevant would be found there. But it was one way of distracting himself from his own problems. As he flicked the machine on, he wondered if he truly thought Dan Sturridge innocent or if he only wanted to believe it was so. He had long ago realized that, given even an unlikely reason to believe what they wanted, most people would convince themselves it was true, and he was not arrogant enough to think himself above this maxim.

He sighed and squinted through his glasses at the screen. It was undeniable that Sally James wrote well, but the story she told was not one that interested him.

The novel, of course, was unfinished; Bethancourt estimated there was something less than half of it here, and the chapters were filled with notes for revisions. He ploughed on, giving only half his mind to the exercise, until he recognized the Warburtons. They were well disguised, but in their position as landlords and in the detailing of the wife's heroic battle with her knitting and the husband's odd habits with his pipe they were unmistakable to anyone who knew that Sally had based her characters on people in the area. In the novel it was their son who had returned to join his father's solicitor's firm and was having an affair while his wife was pregnant. A younger son spent his evenings peering in at the windows of a cottage rented by his parents for the summer to an attractive woman and Bethancourt could not help but wonder if this accurately reflected the practice of young Ted Warburton, just turned thirteen.

The story still struck no chord in him, but at the introduction of every new character he was delighted to discover an echo of someone he knew in the district. Tom Poots and Bob Bailey were there, Tom transformed into a large, fair bachelor and Bob into his dimwitted cohort. Even Boudelman and his restaurant were represented in the character of Harold Winge, a grouchy little man with a long-established restaurant who purchased the poached game and took perverse



pleasure in selling it back to those well-to-do clients it had been stolen from. The book had very little humor in it, but the portrait of Winge rubbing his hands in glee when the Warburton characters came in and ordered the quail, which unbeknownst to them had been freshly poached from their lands the night before, was very wittily done.

Bethancourt might not have identified Boudelman with Winge but for a note that read, "Look at this again: must be certain B. is adequately camouflaged." He could well understand that; the Warburtons might be annoyed at having their eccentricities noted in such scathing detail, young Ted would doubtless be embarrassed, but for Boudelman any suspicion of the truth would mean ruin. As it had for Dan Sturridge, who was far less well disguised, beyond being given black hair and a new family.

Bethancourt sat up, shaking off his sleep-deprived haze, and realized at last what he had just read. Here was a motive as compelling as Dan Sturridge's if, of course, it was true, and if Boudelman had known of Sally's involvement in Poots's affairs. Struck by a sudden memory, he reopened Sally's journal to the penultimate entry and found what he had thought to be a notation of a lunch or dinner date. "Boudelman tomorrow," it read. But it could as easily mean a meeting with Boudelman as a date to dine at his restaurant. And if he was right, she had met

with Boudelman to discuss something on the day before her death.

He glanced at his watch. It was nearly five; in all likelihood the Poots household would be rousing in another hour. He could wash, dress, have some coffee and still be there in plenty of time to greet them as they woke.

"I truly don't want to be a nuisance," said Bethancourt in his most ingratiating manner, "but I couldn't help wondering why Mark Boudelman isn't on the suspect list."

Detective Inspector Burgess's expression, which had been one of much-trying patience, shifted to allow a tinge of curiosity to show through.

"Mark Boudelman?" he asked.

"Yes," said Bethancourt. "It just seems to me, after reading Sally James's computer files, that he had as great a motive as either Dan Sturridge or Tom Poots. I expect," he added in a conciliatory fashion, "you've already discovered he has an iron-clad alibi or something of that sort. But I just wondered."

Burgess was frowning. "I don't remember any mention of Boudelman in the computer files," he said. "Aside, of course, from her having eaten there—but who hasn't?"

Bethancourt raised an eyebrow. "I meant her characterization of him in the novel. It's very well disguised, of course, but to a man in his position that might not have been enough."

Burgess's frown deepened. "I

haven't read it all," he admitted. "I've gone over the other files carefully, but I've only read the first chapter or two of the novel itself. My sergeant read it through and said there was nothing there to help us, so I haven't bothered. What did he miss?"

"Boudelman has been buying game from Tom Poots," said Bethancourt, "and selling it back as entrees to the very people it was poached from. You can laugh if you like; even I think it's funny."

Burgess's lips were twitching, but he restrained himself from actually chuckling. "And this was in the novel? Yes, I can see how that constitutes motive: if Boudelman's clientele ever discovered that, they'd leave him in droves—not to mention prosecute him—and his restaurant would go under. And from what I've heard he has everything he owns wrapped up in the place. But how would he find out what was in the book?"

"The night Tom and Bob took Sally poaching," replied Bethancourt, "they met Boudelman afterwards to sell the stuff. Sally was still in the van, and Boudelman saw her. She gave him all sorts of promises of confidentiality, and Tom thought everything was settled. He trusted her, after all, and didn't see why anybody else shouldn't. But I doubt Boudelman was completely reassured. I think he met with her again—there's a note in her journal—and wasn't happy with whatever she told him."

Burgess gave a deep and long-

suffering sigh. "I suppose Poots told you all this," he said. "May I ask why you haven't bothered to mention it to me?"

"I *am* mentioning it," retorted Bethancourt. "He didn't tell me Sally had been with him when he met with Boudelman until I got the idea myself and went round this morning to ask him."

Burgess was clearly undecided on whether to believe this or not, but he shrugged, apparently deciding it didn't matter. A new gleam came into his eye. "If Tom Poots has been telling the truth all along—a thing, by the way," he added, "unprecedented in the history of the Yorkshire constabulary—then we also have to take seriously his story of the stolen shotgun."

He rose and went to a map of the county hanging on the wall. "Where did Poots leave his van?" he asked.

"About here," said Bethancourt, tracing the line of the road with his finger.

"Then that fits," said Burgess, nodding in satisfaction. "That's the road Boudelman travels to get home from his restaurant. If he's been buying from Poots, he'd know the van, and he'd know Poots keeps his shotgun in the back. And it occurs to me now that the day Sally James was killed is the day Boudelman's restaurant is closed."

"So Boudelman will go on your suspect list?" asked Bethancourt hopefully.

Burgess smiled at him. "Yes, sir, he will. And my sergeant will



go in the doghouse for missing this. We'll pick up Poots's van to check for fingerprints and have a close look at Boudelman's movements. No doubt," he added dryly, "if we miss anything, you'll be round again to tell us about it."

"Oh no, inspector," said Bethancourt. "I wouldn't want to be a nuisance."

"Phillip," said Marla, "I rang to see if you want to go to Paris next week. I'm free from Thursday on and don't have to be back until the following Tuesday."

Bethancourt had wanted to postpone this conversation until he returned to London, but there was no help for it now. He shifted his grip on the receiver and said, "Thursday is fine—I'll ring the estate agent. I don't think," he added, "I'll be getting a place for myself."

"Oh?" Her tone was neutral.

He had fully intended to leave it there, with the ball firmly in her court, but instead he found himself saying, "Frankly, I don't see the point. If I'm in Paris, I'll be there to see you—it makes far more sense if I stay with you."

"I suppose it does," Marla agreed thoughtfully. "Well, then perhaps we ought to look for a bigger flat than I'd intended—something with room for both of us."

Moving in with Marla, even if only on one side of the Channel, had not been his intention, but he could hardly say so now. And her voice had been hesitant, not as though she were wondering if she had read him right but as if

she were turning the idea over in her own mind and was unsure of its merits. Was this, he wondered, really how marriages were made?

"That's an idea," he said. "We'll see what we find, shall we?"

"Yes," she agreed. "That will be best. So you'll be back on Monday?"

"That's right. Jack has to be at work, so we'll drive down Sunday night."

"Jack?" she asked, her tone suspicious. "I didn't know he was up there with you. Have you been mucking about with another murder, Phillip?"

"Not really," he answered. "At least, not one of Jack's. I'll tell you about it when I see you."

Marla sighed. "All right. Good-bye, love."

"Goodbye."

He rang off and stood staring at the phone for a moment, thinking that if this trip to Yorkshire had done nothing to clear his mind, it had at least shown up how confused he truly was.

"I knew Dan Sturridge couldn't possibly have done such a thing. You can see now how unnecessary it was to tell the police about him and that James woman."

There was a note of triumph in Ellen Bethancourt's voice as she presided over dinner that night.

"Ellen," said her husband, "we still don't know for certain that Dan is innocent. The police investigation isn't complete yet."



"I thought you said they'd found Mark Boudelman's prints in Tom Poots's van," she protested.

"Since," said Robert rather grimly, "he has apparently been buying illegal game from Poots, that is not in itself proof of murder."

Ellen smiled. "Men never do like to admit when a woman's intuition has been proved right," she said.

"What about Cathy?" asked Bethancourt, who had no desire to hear yet again his parents' views on restaurateurs who dealt with poachers. Even if he wasn't a murderer, Boudelman's career was finished. "Do you think she'll take Dan back?"

"I don't know," answered Ellen thoughtfully. "Heaven knows Dan has behaved very badly, but there is a chance he's learned his lesson, and with a baby on the way . . ." She shrugged. "Well, I know what I'd do if I were she, but these modern girls all have their own ideas."

Robert was eyeing his son. "Inspector Burgess made a point of telling me to thank you for your information, Phillip," he said. "He seemed to think I would know all about it, but he can't have meant what you told him about Dan."

Bethancourt waved his fork. "It was nothing," he said. "I had an idea about Boudelman this morning after I read Sally's book, and I dropped by to mention it to the inspector, that's all."

"An idea?" said Gibbons, grinning. "You know perfectly well he never thought of Boudelman un-

til you put it into his head. And I sympathize with him—I've been in the same position many a time."

"It was his sergeant's fault he didn't know," said Bethancourt. "I understand the sergeant's not a local man and he didn't realize it was Boudelman in the book."

Robert looked gratified. "You really ought to think about joining the C.I.D., Phillip," he said. "I know I've mentioned it before, but I think this drives home my point. It could be an excellent career for you."

"Yes," mumbled Bethancourt, returning his attention to his plate. "I'll give it some thought."

"This is all very dull for you, Jack," said Ellen. "Here you've come to get away from work and what do we give you but more murder."

"That's all right," said Gibbons. "Even if there was a murder, at least no one was ringing me up to come and solve it. And the countryside and fresh air have done wonders for me."

"Yes, the weather has been especially fine the last few days," said Robert.

The conversation passed into other, more peaceful, channels.

Bethancourt closed the boot of the Jaguar and called to Cereberus, who was investigating an interesting smell on the lawn.

"All set, Jack?" he asked.

Gibbons lowered himself stiffly into the passenger seat and groaned as he levered his legs in one by one. This was the result of a rash impulse on the day before.



Seeing his friend still so oppressed by his problems with Marla, Gibbons had recklessly offered to learn how to ride. Bethancourt, at least, had enjoyed the session. "I'm ready," he said.

Bethancourt glanced over at him as he settled himself in the driver's seat. "Still sore?" he asked.

"Yes, I bloody well am. You might have warned me."

"Well, a hot bath should help."

"That's what you said last night."

"You'll be better tomorrow," said Bethancourt imperturbably. "Did you get enough studying in?"

"I think so," said Gibbons cautiously. "If I keep up with it this week, I think I should do well enough."

The sun had sunk behind the hills, leaving a warm glow in the sky above the peaks. The shadows of the ash trees lay long across the drive as Bethancourt guided the Jaguar down the lane. "I'd like to stop by the Pootses' and give Tom the news if you don't mind," he said. "We'll be a bit late getting back to town, though."

"We're going to be late in any case," said Gibbons. "I don't mind. But I'll stay in the car—having once gotten down here, I have no desire to do it again."

Poots emerged from the house as they drove up, shushing his dogs, and smiled as he recognized the car.

"I thought you might not have heard the news," said Bethancourt, coming round the side of the Jaguar to meet him. "The police arrested Boudelman today."

"So it really was him?" Poots looked incredulous.

"Without a doubt," affirmed Bethancourt. "They found his prints in your van and your shotgun in the beck behind Sally's cottage. And they've got a witness who saw him climbing up the other side of the dale behind the cottage at four o'clock that afternoon, carrying a shotgun."

Poots shook his head. "I'd never have thought it," he said and added sadly, "If only I'd not let her come to meet him. But she was so keen, and I thought no harm of it."

"And none should have come," said Bethancourt firmly. "There was really nothing in her book to make anyone suspicious, but I suppose from Boudelman's point of view, any story about a restaurant owner buying poached game was too great a danger."

"And they're sure it's my gun?" asked Poots. "He couldn't have counted on finding that, you know."

"The police think that was just coincidence. Boudelman is refusing to say a word, but there's no doubt she met with him at the restaurant early Sunday morning—both she and her car were seen. I imagine he demanded an assurance that nothing about him would go into the book, which she probably refused to grant. The police think he was determined to have it out with her again the next day when the restaurant was closed, and perhaps he even had the idea of threatening her to get what he



wanted. Then that night he passed your van abandoned on the road. He might have stopped initially to offer you help, but finding the van empty, he helped himself to the gun. Even then he might not have intended murder, although certainly with a gun in his possession, the idea wouldn't be long in occurring to him. But we really don't know if he went to the cottage meaning to kill her, or if he only resorted to that when she refused to cut the Winge character from her book. Anyway, I imagine that's what his lawyers will claim when it comes to trial."

"Well," said Poots, "you've done me a service, Mr. Bethancourt, and no mistake. Come on in and I'll stand you a drink."

"I'd like to," said Bethancourt, "but I'm on my way to London. I only stopped by to give you the news."

"Back to that sinful southern city?" Poots grinned. "Eh, well, you'll come to your senses one day, no doubt."

"Perhaps one day," said Bethancourt. "I haven't shown much sign of it so far, though."

They shook hands and Bethancourt slid back into the Jaguar. "He was pleased?" asked Gibbons.

"Oh yes," said Bethancourt, starting the engine and reversing carefully. The sky above the

hills had darkened while he spoke to Poots, and the Jaguar's headlights made pools of yellow light on the road before them. Bethancourt turned south along the Wharfe, gathering speed.

"Do you know," he said, "we should have a celebration for your promotion. I'll be back from Paris on Tuesday—we could plan something for Friday or Saturday."

"They won't make the announcements for another fortnight," said Gibbons. "We can celebrate then if I make it." He paused. "Why did you decide to go to Paris after all?" he asked. "You never did say."

Bethancourt did not answer for a long moment. "It seemed easiest," he said at last. "What worries me is that the easy things aren't always the right ones. Look at Dan Sturridge. It was easiest for him to agree to become a father, even though he wasn't really ready yet, and see what came of it."

"If he hadn't agreed," said Gibbons, "it would hardly've pleased his wife and the marriage might have fallen apart anyway. Sometimes, Phillip, there are no right answers. Sometimes you just have to muddle along and hope for the best."

"Well, I'm certainly muddling," said Bethancourt.



# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the February issue.*

When a building boom hit Atlanta, construction workers from different states soon filled the six story Old South apartment building. The building contained only one apartment on each floor, each occupied by a man and his wife. No two men, including Mr. Oller, worked at the same job; one was a welder. One man was named Fred; one woman was Flora. One couple was from Texas.

Over lunch, a union boss said to the others at the table, "I've heard a man living in those apartments is *moonlighting*—pulling another shift at a different trade, one for which he's not paying union dues!"

"Shameful!" they all agreed. "What will we do?" someone asked. "Send McQuay," came the answer. "He's good at that sort of thing."

Jay McQuay, a quiet, unassuming investigator, questioned the occupants of the apartment building with the following results:

(1) Elmo told McQuay, "Mr. Quinn lives just below the plumber and just above the man from Washington. They are married to Betty, Cindy, and Ellen, but I'm not sure in what order."

(2) The foreman reported, "Mr. Smith lives just below Chet and just above Ellen's husband."

(3) Cindy stated, "I live just above Mr. Purdy, who is not on the ground floor, and I am just below the mason. I know *definitely* that neither of them nor my husband would moonlight."

(4) Doris added, "Brad lives immediately below Mr. Nader and just above the carpenter. None of them came from Vermont, and neither did I."

(5) The man from Utah declared, "I live just below Dan and just above Mr. Roget."

(6) The riveter volunteered that he lived just below the man from Tennessee and just above Alice.

(7) The electrician said that he occupied the apartment just below the man from Wyoming and just above Adam.

*If all are telling the truth, who is the moonlighter?*

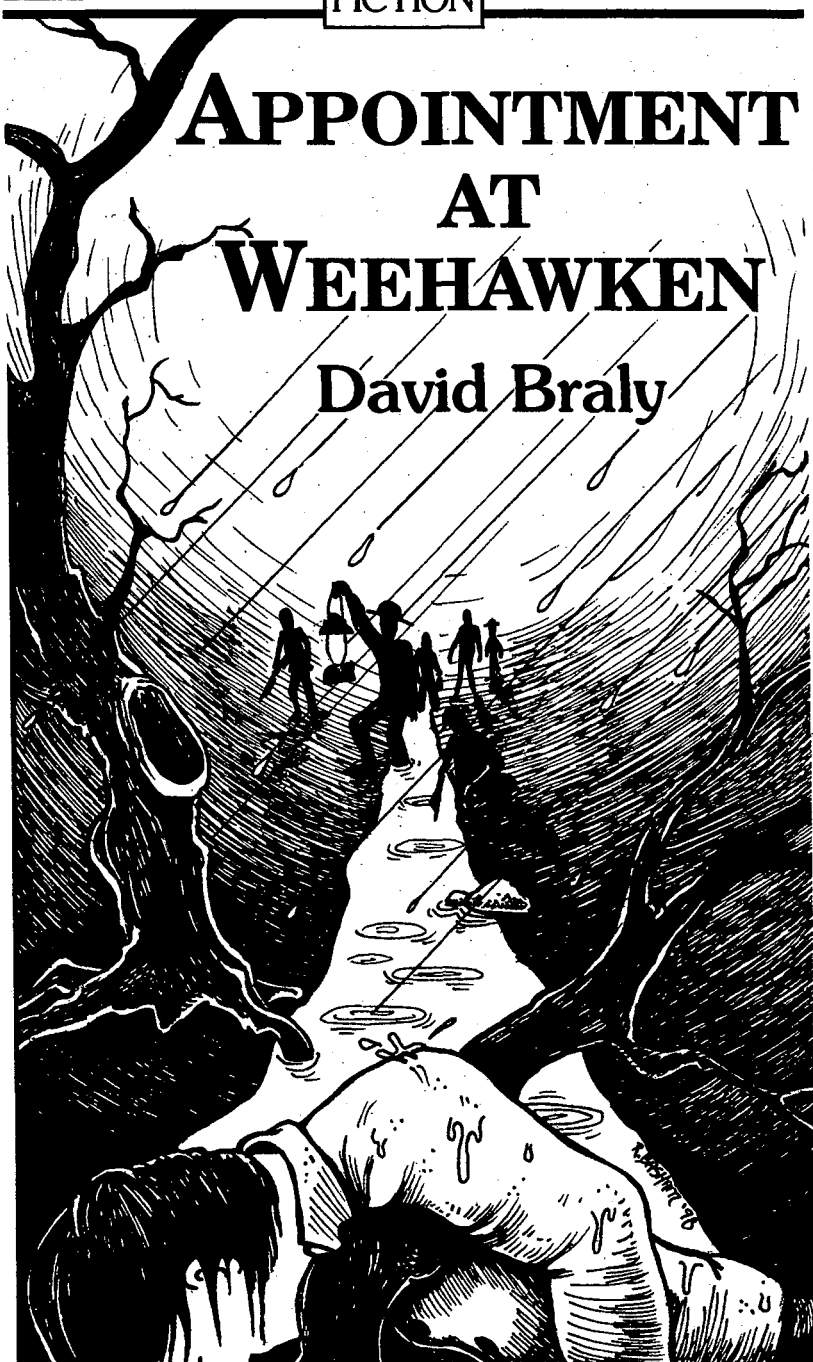
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See page 125 for the solution to the December puzzle.

FICTION

# APPOINTMENT AT WEEHAWKEN

David Braly



*Illustration by Ray Basham*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/99*

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**N**ormally murder investigations were not the responsibility of Constable William Stanhope, but of course there were few murders in New-York City and normally the sheriff was in town. The sheriff had gone to visit his sister's family in Albany and would be gone for more than a week. Stanhope was the senior police official in town the day the body was found.

Stanhope was a quiet family man who lived on Greenwich Street in a ramshackle little house with his wife and five children. A tall, sandy-haired man with a slow gait and slower manner of speaking, he was nevertheless a brave officer who was not afraid to confront the most dangerous criminals. He had served in the war as a sergeant in the Connecticut Line and had first become acquainted with New-York when fighting the enemy in its vicinity. After the enemy withdrew following the war, Stanhope moved there, hoping to get work as a carpenter, since large sections of the city had been destroyed. Eventually he found work as both a carpenter and a constable, and he was looked upon as diligent and skilled in both.

Sunday, 18 June 1797, arrived wet. The previous day had produced a variety of weather, including hot sun, rain, wind, and hail. It had finished in rain, and the rain had persevered into Sunday morning until about nine o'clock. William Stanhope, staying home, had spent most of the day reading a borrowed book about the islands of the Pacific Ocean. He had regarded the day as a pleasant one, comfortable in his chair, the rain welcome because it had been dry of late and the dust in town had been bad whenever the wind picked up. After the morning rain, the day had been cloudy until after dinner, when violent showers came and thunder rumbled above, and this too was pleasant while he was inside the house. It was then, in the evening while he was reading the book by candlelight, that the frantic knock came at the front door.

When he opened it, he found James Henderson standing there in the rain with two men he did not recognize.

"You better come fast, Mr. Stanhope," said Henderson. "A man's been found dead near the woods, and it looks like he was shot."

Stanhope went for his hat and coat. The rain seemed less pleasant when he actually rode out into it. They had to ride slowly to avoid gopher holes and other such obstacles common to the town and the countryside around it that could not be seen in the pitch dark.

Someone had already recognized the dead man as Colonel Robert Howard, a big land speculator visiting from Georgia. He had been in his late forties, a slender man with brown hair held in a queue, a well-formed dark face, and apparel of the finest material and cut. The apparel had been ruined by blood and a hole shot into Howard's chest, however. He lay at the edge of the East River, near the woods, just below the wagon road that bordered the farms. About a dozen men had

gathered around the body, which was uncovered and being beaten by the hard rain. Except for one lantern there was no light.

"Who found him?" asked Stanhope after he had examined the body in the lanternlight.

"I did," said one of the men. "Just before dark. Noticed the carrion birds circling and got curious.

"What's your name?"

"Samuel Langston. I own the farm over there. And I've never seen this gentleman before. I've no idea what he was doing on my land."

"Getting killed," quipped one man.

"No," said Stanhope. "The only blood here is what's on his body and clothes. There's none on the ground. He's been moved here from somewhere else."

Stanhope touched the dead man's arm. From its feel, and his memories of the war, he guessed that the man had been dead about a day. Beyond that, there was nothing more he knew to do at the scene, so he secured Langston's wagon and the help of another man in moving the body into town.

Of course, the following day the whole town was in shock. Murders seldom happened in New-York City, and the idea that a gentleman visiting from another state, and one who had reportedly served with distinction during the Revolution, had been killed in the area appalled all good citizens.

Stanhope thought that his best chance of solving the murder was to retrace Colonel Howard's steps from the time of his arrival. Because he had only recently arrived in town, he should not have had time to acquire many enemies, still less one so hostile as to murder him.

The constable spent several days putting together the story. Colonel Howard had arrived on the rainy and cold Saturday of 20 May and rented a room in a boardinghouse on Rector Street. He said that he had come to New-York in search of investors for western lands that his partners and he were negotiating to acquire from the Creek and Cherokee nations. Howard said that his own money was heavily invested in the enterprise, and that the titles were good, unlike those to millions of acres of "Yazoo" lands repudiated the previous year by the Georgia legislature. He said that he had wide experience in such matters, his father, a South Carolina planter and surveyor, having taught him as a youth how to locate and resell the best lands. Indeed, he had almost been involved with General Washington in an Ohio Valley investment, but the general had decided not to enter the venture, only to wish later that he had invested, after Howard resold the land within a year for twice as much as he paid for it.

Howard's timing could hardly have been worse. The war between France and Britain, carrying with it the likelihood that the United

States would be dragged in, had triggered the collapse of the American economy. Land prices had plummeted, and sales were down. Major land speculators, including "the financier of the Revolution," Robert Morris, were on their way to debtors' prison. Stanhope learned that Howard had had this unpleasant fact pointed out to him less than a fortnight earlier, on Friday, 9 June.

Stanhope visited the Tontine Coffee House, at the corner of Wall and Water streets, where the encounter was said to have taken place. John Hyde, the proprietor, was out, but a hired man, Peter Jones, was able to tell Stanhope all the details about that cloudy, sultry, and, it turned out, explosive evening. He said that Colonel Howard had invited a half dozen of the town's leading citizens to have dinner with him and tried to sell them on his land scheme. Nobody was interested. One of the men, Captain Phelim Fox, had immediately risen to leave when he learned the purpose of the dinner.

"Will you not do me the courtesy of hearing me out, sir?" Howard had demanded.

"I mean you no disrespect, sir," replied Fox, "but no one is going to invest in developments to the westward until the present difficulties have been resolved."

"These are not Yazoo lands, sir."

"I understand that. The difficulties I refer to are the collapse of the land market everywhere in America."

"I anticipate no difficulty selling every share in this company to talented men of business who can see what is in their best interest," said Howard. "I already have commitments from several gentlemen in North Carolina and Virginia."

"I find that . . . astounding."

"What, sir! Do you accuse me of lying?"

"I accuse you of nothing," replied Fox. "I do not know you well enough to accuse you of anything, and notice that you present no letters."

"I . . . I had letters of introduction from several eminent personages, including Mr. Randolph of Virginia. They were lost or stolen in an inn on my way north, sir. And when you say you do not accuse me because you do not know me, it implies that you would accuse me if you did know me."

"You put words in my mouth, Colonel Howard. Good day, sir."

"Are you afraid then?"

At that, Captain Fox, who had turned toward the door, turned back to face Howard. "You speak too freely," said Fox. "I believe that you owe me an apology."

"You'll not get one from me, sir."

"Then I will communicate with you shortly, colonel."

Stanhope rode to the Fox house, which was near Astor's on Broad-

way. It was two stories, with a large porch, and had unusually large windows. A house slave who wore better attire than Stanhope showed the constable into Fox's library, where he had been copying outgoing correspondence into his letter-book.

"When I heard that Colonel Howard's body had been found with a pistol ball in it," said Fox after Stanhope had been invited to sit, "I assumed that someone would be calling on me."

Fox was in his thirties, a ramrod-straight, tall, round-faced man with steady brown eyes and long brown hair. He wore clothes of good quality, although somewhat out of style, and spoke in a slow, precise, unhurried manner. Stanhope had already found out that Fox had a degree from one of the colleges, had practiced law, had made a large amount of money in the fur trade, and had served under General Hamilton during the Whiskey Rebellion.

"Your argument with Colonel Howard at the Tontine Coffee House appears to have been the only dispute he got into while in New-York," observed Stanhope.

"I can't say otherwise."

"And it appears to have ended with a challenge."

Fox smiled. "If we had dueled, why would I bother to deny it?"

"Dueling is illegal."

"But that law is never observed."

"Usually duelists go across to Weehawken so that technically it occurs in New-Jersey. If a duel were fought on the soil of New-York, it could very well lead to prosecution."

"Any duel I fought, I would fight in New-Jersey."

"Colonel Howard probably died somewhere other than Manhattan. His body had been moved. It might have been New-Jersey."

"Then why would the man who killed him bother to deny it? A fair duel, on legal ground, leaves no ground for prosecution."

"Perhaps," said Stanhope, "the killer was worried about revenge by the victim's family."

Fox's eyes narrowed when Stanhope spoke of a "killer" and a "victim," and Stanhope saw them narrow. It convinced him on the spot that Fox was either the killer or knew who was.

"You do not seem to be familiar with the Code Duello," said Fox.

"I'm not a gentleman, only a workingman, so there is little need for me to know it."

"The Code prohibits any form of revenge as a result of a duel. Families of dueling 'victims'—as it may please you to call them—do not seek revenge. It is a contract that the participants enter into, one that is binding upon any family or friends conscious of their honor."

Stanhope noticed that in nothing Fox had said had he specifically denied killing Howard. He believed, given Fox's reputation and pride, and the fact that there would have been seconds present as witness-



es who would know if he lied, that Fox would tell the truth if Stanhope asked the right question. That question, he believed, would be the most direct.

"Captain Fox, did you kill Colonel Howard in a duel?"

"No, sir, I did not."

"Did you wound him in a duel?"

"No, sir, I never dueled with Colonel Howard at any time."

Stanhope stood to leave. But he still believed that Fox knew something about Howard's death.

"If you were to engage in a duel," asked Stanhope, "whom would you ask to serve as your second?"

Fox's eyes turned cold. Clearly he could see what Stanhope wanted to do: question the man Fox named. Which meant that Stanhope was implying that Captain Fox might be lying.

"If you were a gentleman—" said Fox, but he did not finish. Stanhope was not a gentleman, and that was the end of it. "I decline to answer," he said.

Stanhope now knew that Fox had killed Howard despite his denials, but he could not understand why the denials were being made. If there had been a duel in New-Jersey, Fox had committed no crime. It could be murder only if Fox had killed him unfairly, and Fox wasn't the sort of man who would behave unfairly. Indeed, he took such pride in his social position that Stanhope suspected he would rather die than do anything dishonorable.

The sheriff returned to New-York on Thursday, 29 June, and the following day he and Stanhope discussed the Howard murder. They decided to stop the investigation. Nobody seemed to know anything except those men who were keeping quiet, those whom Stanhope presumed to be Fox and the seconds. Stanhope spent the remainder of that sweltering hot day writing letters to everyone Howard had mentioned as acquaintances, including General Washington, asking if any of them could inform him of Howard's next of kin so that they could be notified of his death.

Tuesday, 25 July, was a day that William Stanhope would remember for the remainder of his life. He walked down to the post office that morning. It was a pleasant day, intermittent showers bringing welcome moisture, and he was in a good mood. The previous afternoon he had finished a profitable carpentry job at Ricketts' Circus on Greenwich, and notwithstanding the worsening economy he was doing well. At the post office, he found a letter addressed to "Constable W. Stanhope, N.-York City," with the word "Free" scribbled and circled in the upper right-hand corner. No one he knew had franking privileges, and he suspected that the congressman whom he'd written to about Colonel Howard had already replied. That made him feel good because while he might not be able to identify the gentleman's

murderer, at the very least he might be able to inform the family. When he returned home, he opened the letter and read:

Mount Vernon, 12 July 1797

Dear Sir,

*Your letter of the 30th inst. is at hand, and I regret to inform you that I do not recall having ever made the acquaintance of Col: Howard. Last year a gentleman in Georgia associated in the Yazoo lands wrote to enquire of the same gentleman, who he said had tried to buy land there on a note, and who he said had represented himself as having almost formed a partnership with me to buy Ohio lands. No partnership with anyone named Col: Howard was ever contemplated by me, either in the Ohio country or anywhere else.*

*I am—Dear Sir,*

*Your Obed. & Hbl Serv.  
G:o Washington.*

*Constable Stanhope  
N.-York City.*

Stanhope was so impressed at receiving a letter from General Washington that the first time he read it he barely noticed the information it related. After he read it again, and did notice, he did not give the matter much thought. He assumed that Colonel Howard had exaggerated some trivial incident out of all proportion to reality because it had appeared important to him but was so unimportant that the former president had quickly forgotten it.

However, as other letters arrived through August, September, and October, Stanhope realized that Howard was no mere embellisher but an out-and-out fraud. He had claimed business ties to the Randolphs and Lees of Virginia, the Catheys and Carsons of North Carolina, the Marions and Alstons of South Carolina, and, while in Georgia, to the Schuylers and Livingstons of New-York, and not one of them had ever heard of him except when someone else wrote seeking confirmation of their business relationship with him. The most informative letter that Stanhope received came from a sheriff in South Carolina:

Dear Sir:

*Col: MacSweeney informed me yesterday of your letter to him of two months ago, which arrived recently, and I hope that you will excuse my impertinence, sir, in answering for him; however he believed that I could better inform you with respect to Mr. Howard than he could.*

*First, sir, I must inform you that Robert Howard was a cheat and a swindler, and his claims to land were as bogus as his military title and war service. He was the son of a laborer employed in the smith works*

*of Capt. Nash. He acquired an education superior to his station in life as the childhood companion of Capt. Nash's son, attending the school that was established on the Nash plantation for the Nash children and their friends. Mr. Osgood, now of Fair Forest, was the teacher. Mr. Howard, upon reaching maturity, turned this opportunity with which he had been presented, and presented to him thro: no merit of his own but by mere chance, to criminal pursuits. He used his knowledge and good manners to talk otherwise talented men into investing their money with him in land to which he had no title, and indeed to which he never sought any title or ever set foot or eyes upon. He had no more claim to these lands, sir, than you yourself have. He was confined in jails on several occasions, but it never deterred him for long. He had no living family, and I assure you, sir, no one here shall mourn his passing:*

So Captain Fox had been right about Robert Howard's claim of having other investors. Probably Fox had seen that it was a swindle all along.

Stanhope no longer believed with certainty that Fox was the killer. He remained suspicious of him because of his evasive answers and his refusal to name who his second would have been had there been a duel, but now there were myriad other suspects, all of them nameless. Howard had swindled men in several of the States, and it was entirely possible that one of his victims had followed him to New-York in order to end his criminal career forever.

He continued to think so until early the following year. Then, suddenly and without having thought about Howard or Fox in weeks, he had one of those unexpected bursts of realization that sometimes come out of nowhere and resolve a difficult problem.

It was 27 January 1798. Because it was a Saturday, the family was at home, and because New-York was being buried by a snowstorm, they were all indoors. Stanhope was seated at the table with a pencil and paper, attempting to sketch the design of a rather complicated bookcase that a local lawyer wanted for his office. He happened to look up just when John and Will, Junior, were standing back-to-back, trying to see who was the taller, John as usual insisting against all evidence and logic that it was he.

"You look like a couple of duelists," said their father.

"Someday I'm going to fight a duel," said John emphatically.

"No, you're not. It's illegal. Besides, only gentlemen can duel, and the Stanhopes are not gentlemen."

And, then, it came! The explanation burst upon him.

Stanhope could not don his coat and hat and bolt out into the storm fast enough to suit him. He saddled his horse with equal celerity and was soon a lone rider making his way through the snowfall towards

Broadway. He was not sure that Captain Fox would receive him, especially since he would arrive unannounced. If Fox did, however, Stanhope was sure that he would have his confession before he left the house.

Stanhope was admitted, and again was shown into the library. Stanhope told Fox about the letters he had received, especially the South Carolina sheriff's information that Howard was the thieving son of a common laborer. Fox did not seem surprised although he was clearly interested in the details.

"So I ask you, sir," said Stanhope when he had finished, "did you kill Robert Howard last June?"

"Have I not already answered that question?"

Stanhope smiled. Fox was a clever fellow. He did not say that he had already answered it; he merely asked if he had, and in a tone that suggested that you would be a fool to deny it. But now Stanhope knew how to pin him. And Fox would not lie. He was a gentleman, and there had been witnesses.

"No, sir," said Stanhope, "you have not. You said that you had not killed Howard in a duel, but never said that you had not killed Howard."

Fox stared over the desk at Stanhope for a minute without saying anything. He was obviously wrestling with the issue of truth and lies, probably seeking a way to circumvent the question again. But there was no way.

"Yes," he said at last, "I killed him."

"But not in a duel," guessed Stanhope.

"Not in a duel. We—my second and I—went to Weehawken for that purpose. The encounter had been set for the morning of the seventeenth. We rowed over, expecting to find Colonel Howard and his second. Instead, when we disembarked, Howard fired a shot at me from ambush. His ball went through my coat but otherwise did no damage. He had fired with a rifle, which he then put down, and he proceeded to draw a pistol. My pistols were in their case but Doctor—uh, my second—drew his own pistol and called upon Howard to desist at once. Instead, Howard fired at him, missing. I thereupon seized the pistol from my second and fired at Howard, hitting him in the chest. He died immediately. We searched and found no second for him. Apparently the scoundrel intended to murder us both and then give out some story to justify it as fairly done."

"All of which told you that 'Colonel' Robert Howard was no gentleman."

"You can see my dilemma, constable. On the one hand, I had killed the villain in self-defense and so was guilty of no crime whatsoever. On the other hand, I had agreed to fight as a gentleman a man who was not entitled to that honor. My own honor, and my entire family's

position in society, would be at hazard if such information got out. So too would the social position of the honorable man who had agreed to serve as my second. We talked it over and decided that the best plan would be to haul Howard's body back to Manhattan, drop him someplace where he would be found, and, provided no innocent man were charged for it, let people think that he had been murdered."

William Stanhope thought about what Fox had told him. There was no reason to doubt a word of it. If gentlemen condescended to duel with their social inferiors, soon half the country's newspaper editors would be dead.

"Thank you, sir, for satisfying my curiosity," said Stanhope. "I will withdraw now."

"Do you plan to reveal what I have told you, sir?"

"There would be no purpose to that. I do not doubt that you acted in self-defense. Legally, it's no concern of mine, since whatever did happen happened in New-Jersey. It would only serve to embarrass you, and I have no reason or desire to do that."

Stanhope left soon afterward, but he would return to the Fox house on later occasions. Fox wished to show Stanhope his gratitude and did it by having him do any carpentry work that needed doing at the house on Broadway or at his country estate outside town. He paid him handsomely, and guests who visited the houses always admired the work. Fox was always quick to put forward Stanhope's name whenever any friend or associate needed carpentry work done, which struck everyone as strange because normally a gentleman did not promote a workman.

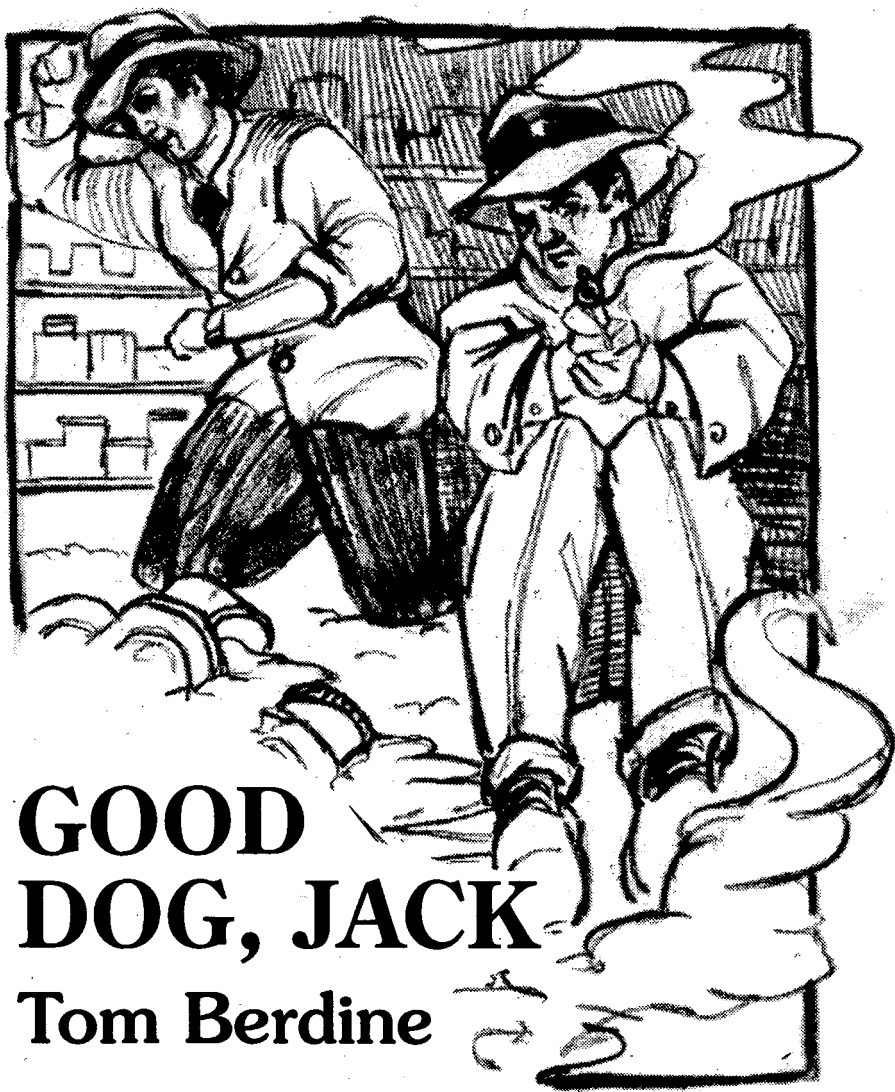
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### **SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":**

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Cabul Navarik, the royal barber, killed Emdul Mubarik, the eunuch.

| SERVANT       | FROM    | POSITION  | RUG     |
|---------------|---------|-----------|---------|
| <b>NORTH</b>  |         |           |         |
| Emdul Mubarik | Rubarum | eunuch    | saffron |
| Babul Kamarik | Qatum   | counselor | brown   |
| Dadul Lalarik | Tarabum | deputy    | blue    |
| Abdul Omarik  | Sagalum | archivist | green   |
| Cabul Navarik | Pajarum | barber    | yellow  |
| <b>SOUTH</b>  |         |           |         |



# GOOD DOG, JACK

Tom Berdine

**S**ay what you like, Jerry Curlee was a man of character. And no dummy, either. I'll tell you when I figured this out. It was August, 1928, and I was a happy man. I had been bumped up to detective from ser-

geant of patrol when Lieutenant Bobby Darling had been accidentally scooped up by the Feds when they tried that year for the umpteenth time to bust up the Stangle gang. Lieutenant Jerry Curlee, Darling's former, and my new,



partner, reputedly wasn't much above such business himself—maybe just luckier than Bobby—but it was all okay with me. I was thirty years old and wearing a suit.

There was more going on than bootleg booze in little Warren, Pa., although you wouldn't believe it to see the town now. The big white pine forests covering the Alleghenies had just about been leveled, but there was top grade anthracite twenty or thirty feet below the surface just about anywhere you cared to dig, and below the coal there was gas, and below the gas there was oil. Money was moving all around, and there was all sorts of action downtown to entertain a workingman with jingly in his pocket. Recently the entertainment had included what Chief Gruener liked to call an honest-to-God crime (as opposed to the five B's: broads, booze, bunko, bookmaking, and broads). A mug named Jack Trotter had walked into the First National Penn on Allegheny Avenue in broad daylight, ten o'clock in the morning on July third, and held it up for thirty-seven thousand dollars, gunning down the bank guard, Lenny Ferpo, who was, as Warren PD's luck would have it, a shirttail relation of Congressman Jensen. Lenny had stepped in front of Jack and said, as the *Sentinel* told it the next day, "Jack, just what in \*\*\*\* do you think you're doing?" I had gone to school with Lenny and could believe this. Still, Lenny was a man in blue even if a lesser blue, and if the local lowlife

got the idea they could bump a bank guard, next they might think they could do a real cop.

That was July third, and it had put a crimp in the Independence Day festivities so far as the department was concerned. It was now August sixteenth, not a trace of Jack Trotter, the temperature in the high nineties for the past week and a half and that wasn't the only heat coming down. The congressman was of the opinion that the Warren PD should have had the likes of Jack Trotter, a strictly smalltime grifter, a drunk, and a wife beater, under better control in the first place. The *Sentinel*, which was owned by coal, and the *Times*, owned by oil and gas, usually could be counted on to sound off on only the most mundane of issues and had always been friends of the police. Now there had been a progression of editorials suggesting some sort of connection between Lieutenant Darling's "recent difficulties" and "the lack of public order in the heart of Our Downtown." Chief Gruener's laissez-faire attitude had been disturbed, and consequently so had Lieutenant Jerry Curlee's.

"I told the son of a bitch he's in Erie by now, headed for the border. Or Cleveland. Jesus!"

Curlee had gravel in his voice from years of the cigars he had sworn off just a week previous. His face looked empty and his nose too long without a cigar, and abstinence had brought out his mean streak. He was driving, which was ordinarily the rookie's

task. This was his way of getting after me just as the chief had gotten after him, and on our way uptown he had gone on for a bit about what a lousy driver I was and how he didn't have all day to get where he was going, et cetera. Our assignment for the day was checking back on all the same contacts that had been checked before, when Jack Trotter's bank robbery was still hot. We had come from the walkup apartments of Jack's two girlfriends, one a schoolteacher, the other a waitress in a speak, neither of whom was helpful in the least, and were on our way to Jack's official residence where he kept his wife.

I knew Jenny Trotter from my patrol days. My partner Lucore and I had been there three or four times on noise complaints when Jack was slapping her around. I could only imagine how a girl like Jenny had gotten mixed up with a guy like Jack Trotter. She was no beauty but not bad either, even with the slightly bucked teeth, a hill country girl by the Scotch-Irish edge in her voice and skinny like all ridge-runners, but also some Iroquois in the brown eyes and thin, curved nose. She must have thought a buck like Jack was just the one to take her away from a lifetime of hoeing corn and washing coal dust or drilling mud out of overalls.

The Trotter house was on Orchard Street, which goes uphill from Conewongo Avenue and over the top of the ridge into the outskirts of town. We went up

under the cool of the big Dutch elms, smelling the fresh tar on the roadway, and parked just over the crest of a hill where we could see the house but wouldn't be too obvious if Jack happened to be sitting in his living room.

The house stood off a little way from the others in the neighborhood, vacant lots on both sides, a narrow two story with a shed-roof front porch. The trees around the house had been cut down so that it sat frying in the hot sun, every rusty nail showing in the clapboards that had cupped and gone silver from lack of paint. On the porch lay the big dog who was also familiar to me.

"That's Squirt," I told Curlee. "I better go first, maybe he'll let us on the porch."

"Just hold your horses," Curlee said. To my relief he pulled out a cigar and lit up. "Don't tell Lorraine," he said.

"She doesn't have a nose?"

He blew smoke and we watched the house. The big dog rose and stretched his back legs and looked in our direction.

"Squirt, eh?"

"Once he lets you on the porch he's got another bad habit."

"A real comedian, our Jack."

"Yeah, a barrel of laughs."

The dog lay back down and regarded us with his tongue out, panting in the merciless heat. Cicadas in the tree heads above us had started up and risen to their high chorus that sounded like grease on a skillet when the screen door squeaked open and Jenny Trotter came out onto the

porch. She scratched the dog's head and spoke to it, then followed the creature's gaze down the street to where we were parked. She straightened and waited with her arms folded across the front of her light dress.

Curlee grunted and started the cruiser. As the distance closed, I could see Jenny's face was marked.

"Bingo. Our boy's been here. See that shiner."

Curlee parked, and we took a minute to scan the windows of the house for movement. We got out, and I watched the dog carefully as we made our way up the walk. Curlee handled the introductions.

"I already know Sergeant Pratt. Afternoon, Jules."

"Afternoon, Jenny. Looks like you bumped into another door. You feeling all right?"

It was hard to tell how old the injury was, but it was a bad one, worse than usual, a healing cut that had left a skip in her left eyebrow and ran down across the eyelid itself so that she was only able to open it partway. I had long since gotten over the schoolboy's reaction to the other five B's—bruises, blood, broken bones and bodies—hell, I had already been shot once myself, which is how I had made sergeant so young in the first place, so I was surprised at my own reaction to Jenny Trotter's disfigurement. Perhaps it was because she held her small self so straight, her head up instead of ducked down like you see with most of these women who take a beating. It had never

occurred to me before that she'd been a pretty girl. I was going to ask her a few more questions, soften her up as they say, show Curlee I knew what I was doing. He wasn't in the mood for the indirect approach, however.

"Mrs. Trotter, would you kindly ask your husband to step out onto the porch. Jules and I need to speak with him."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," she said. She had that manner of speaking mock-properly that some country people assume to hide their lack of education. "You may come in an' look around if you wish," she said.

Curlee and I looked past her through the screen door with the same idea in our heads. I unholstered my .38, and Curlee brought out the Colt .45 automatic he still had from the war. I said to her, "Perhaps you'd oblige us by standing down by the car with the dog, ma'am."

"Hit's quite unnecessary," she said.

"Please," I said, and she came down the steps with her slim hand in the collar of the big mutt, going past me with her fresh laundry smell. I looked after her and saw that she was barefoot, her thin hips moving beneath her dress, and I experienced that little moment of fear I had been getting since taking that bullet five years before, when my gun was out but I hadn't yet taken that first step into whatever it was to be. The last thing the dead guy saw was—: how I put it to myself.

Curlee, already stationed beside the door, barked, "Come on, kid," and I went up onto the porch. The screen door pulled outward, so I had to cross in front of the opening, and despite the heat I felt a chill run up the back of my neck. Curlee jerked his head at me, and I did the quick duck-in-and-duck-out. Nothing. I could see a section of the front room, the doorway of the hallway leading back to the kitchen, and part of the staircase leading to the second floor. Curlee nodded again, and I went in with my weapon ranging back and forth to the corners, which neither of us had been able to see from outside, and then around the living room and down the hallway. "Okay," I said, and Curlee came in puffing and sweating. We worked the hallway, the small dining room, and on back to the kitchen. I looked to Curlee to decide whether to go next through the cellar door, which was in a corner of the kitchen, or check the second floor. He raised his eyebrows and pointed. We went back down the hallway and, covering each other, made our way up the stairs. There was no one on the second story either. We looked out the back window to see if Jack was beating it out the outside cellar door into the yard, then checked the attic with the same results. When we went down, Jenny Trotter was seated in a kitchen chair like this was any other hot afternoon, the big dog sitting beside her and her hand still under its collar. The

dog muttered and fluffed out his whiskers as we entered.

"You were to wait by the car, ma'am," Curlee growled at her, and the dog answered.

She hushed the dog and apologized. "I thought you'ns was finished."

"What's down there?" Curlee demanded, wagging his Colt at the cellar door.

"Coal bin. Furnace. Preserves. Canning."

Cellars were bad. You were going down into darkness with the light behind you. Curlee shooed Jenny out onto the back porch with the dog, and we got the door open. "Anything flammable down there, ma'am?" Curlee called out to her on the porch.

"Beg pardon?"

"Flammable. Likely to go up in flames."

"No, sir."

"Good." Curlee asked for and received her box of kitchen matches and did the match bundle trick, sending the homemade flare down into the black hole. A hundred canning jars winked back at us but that was all. I eased myself partway down the steps on my belly. I couldn't see a thing. "Jack," I called softly, "it's Jules Pratt. For Christ's sake don't shoot me, okay?"

Curlee snorted behind me.

"There's a light switch right by the door," Jenny called from the porch. Curlee cursed her under his breath and hit the switch. We descended. Canning jars were arranged on shelves along the wall in the cellarway and against two

of the walls of the cellar itself. In the dim back corner black anthracite gleamed through the hatch of the coal crib. With Curlee covering me, I jammed a fire poker deep into the coal until finally Curlee said, "Come on, that's it," and we went back up.

She was seated in the kitchen again with the dog beside her. Curlee irritably proceeded to brush off his suit coat and pants as if it were he and not I who was covered with coal dust. He muttered an obscenity, and the dog growled back again. Curlee was looking at me as he straightened himself up, and I understood that now finally it was my turn to do my stuff.

"Hah! We forgot to look in the furnace," Curlee said, teasing a bit but at the same time shooting Jenny a challenging look. She looked back at Curlee without any expression at all on her face. He gave her a little grin and turned and clumped back down the cellar steps.

I sat in a kitchen chair opposite Jenny and waited for her to look up from petting the dog's head, but she didn't, just kept petting and petting, so I finally said, "That's a bad eye, Jenny."

"Yes, it is," she answered, lifting her wrecked face, and it was if we were discussing the weather. "You got your good suit all dirty."

"You been to the doctor?"

"No." She looked back down.

"How come?"

No answer to this.

"Not finished with Jack yet, huh?"

"Yes, we're about finished with Jack," she said. She just kept stroking the dog's head and I was about to get to the point, which was when had she last seen Jack and where was he, or maybe what was her best guess on that score, when a shout from Curlee brought me to my feet and down the cellar steps with my gun out.

He was standing with his hands on his hips and a grin on his face, staring at the wall of glass bottles, a colorful array of preserved tomatoes, peaches, pears, beans, beets, applesauce, miscellaneous smaller lots of less identifiable stuff, and a great, grey quantity of canned meats.

"Mrs. Trotter," Curlee called sharply. "Come down here!"

"Yes, sir?" she answered from the top of the stairs.

"Would you come down here, please? And leave the dog up there." She came down into the illumination from the dim overhead bulb and peered up into Curlee's face, her own head cocked sideways to favor her good eye.

"What's behind there, Mrs. Trotter?"

"The root cellar," she answered simply.

"Don't be cute with me!" Curlee shouted suddenly, so that both she and I started. "He in there?"

"No, sir," she answered. Curlee pointed with the muzzle of his Colt, and I saw that one section of the shelves holding Jenny Trotter's preserves was backed by a wall of boards which, by the tell-

tale heads of screws not quite concealed behind the bottles, was hinged near the top and at the bottom. Curlee ordered her upstairs. When he'd settled himself on his backside on the dirt floor and steadied his weapon two-handed with his wrists on his knees, he said, "Open her up, kid."

I pulled slow but hard, and the wall of peaches, pears, and snap beans came toward me. The smell of fresh earth yawned out of the opening behind the shelves and Curlee let go with a salvo of shots that emptied his clip. Trying not to cough from the gunsmoke that filled the cellar, I kept myself behind the swinging wall as Curlee jammed his spare clip in place.

"Jack! Come out of there!" Curlee shouted. Nothing. He fished the box of kitchen matches out of his coat and tossed them to me. He nodded vigorously, his eyes over his gun still searching into the black hole. I got his meaning and set the whole box of matches afire and tossed them in. The dull earth walls of a small square room lit up momentarily and went back to blackness. There had been a chair in there, and something dark on the floor beside the chair, but no Jack.

"Go see if she's got a lantern or something," Curlee said, getting up slowly and grunting as he once again swept his trouser legs and seat. Jenny was still at the top of the stairs.

"Here's a candle," she said.

In the small, dim flame, there was Jack Trotter's hideout, a hollowed-out room approximately six

feet across, a cleverer show than we would have given him credit for. A bin of potatoes against the back wall had absorbed most of Curlee's fusillade. A straight-backed chair in the middle of the small room had also taken a few slugs, as had a suit of clothes, otherwise neatly folded across the chair's back, and a bottle of whisky, a cheap bourbon by the aroma that was combining itself with the smell of blasted potatoes. On the floor lay a canvas satchel that contained thirty-seven thousand dollars still taped in First National Bank of Pennsylvania bundles.

"Where the hell is he?" Curlee demanded.

Jenny folded her arms across her middle and looked down.

"We're gonna get you as an accessory, Jenny," Curlee warned. "You better start talking, goddammit, and right now!"

She shook her head helplessly and made no answer. A tear raced down her cheek and spotted the bib of her dress.

Curlee paced back and forth from the coal crib to the root cellar and back, his big head rolling.

"Where's the rest of the money?" he tried.

"I don't know about no money," she said, lifting her face. "I'm not a thief, thank you kindly."

Curlee studied her for a moment, and I thought he was about through. He raised his eyes and looked around almost like a man appealing to heaven, except this was Jerry Curlee and anything of that sort would be more or less impossible.



"This is a damned lot of preserves for just one person, Jenny."

The candle she had brought down the cellar steps had found its way back into her hand, and the small dot of flame jiggled in a thousand reflections from the glass jars ranged in perfect rows around and above us.

"Hit's mostly dogfood," she said.

"Dogfood?" Curlee said incredulously.

"Hit's a big dog," she said.

"Hah!" he barked, and snatching the canvas satchel, brushed past her and stomped up the stairs. I joined him on the porch, where he was relighting his cigar.

"You believe her, Jules?"

"I do, for a fact."

"Hah! Why is that, detective?"

"Young gal like that, if she had known that money was down there, she would have taken a few bucks and got her face fixed up."

"Hah! Not bad, kid, but you still got a lot to learn."

He was almost to the car and I was only halfway down the walk when I heard her on the porch.

"Good dog, Jack," she said, and I turned and watched as she opened a jar of preserves and emptied the grayish glop into the dog's bowl beside the door. She clanked the jar briefly against the side of the bowl, straightened, her hair falling across the side of her face, and watched the dog gobble his food.

"I thought his name was Squirt," I said.

"I changed it."

"I guess you must still miss your husband a lot," I said.

She looked directly at me and, for the first time since we had arrived, smiled, a small, discreet display of pretty white teeth on the pillow of her lower lip. The cicadas in the trees set up their high buzzing sound, and the dog noisily crunched a small bone in his powerful jaws.

"No," she said.

I didn't see Curlee coming back up behind me, he nearly bowled me over going past. Stopping at the bottom of the steps he fished a First National Penn bundle from the satchel and handed it up to her, wagging it a little when she didn't reach out for it, finally going up the steps and putting it directly into her hand.

"You get your face fixed, girly," Curlee said, his voice surprising me with its softness. He lingered, insistent, nodding his big head as she looked back at him, until at last she too nodded briefly and gathered the money to her chest.

"Let's go, Romeo," he said, brushing past me again.

On our way downtown, me back in the driver's seat, Curlee said, "You know—" and here he had to pause to put out a small conflagration that had sprung up on his shirtfront from fallen cigar ash—"I don't think we ever will find Jack Trotter."

"Think he's gone, eh?"

"Hah! Pretty soon he'll be all gone! Hah!"

Curlee, see, had character.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# CRISP NEW BILLS FOR MR. TEAGLE

Frank Sullivan

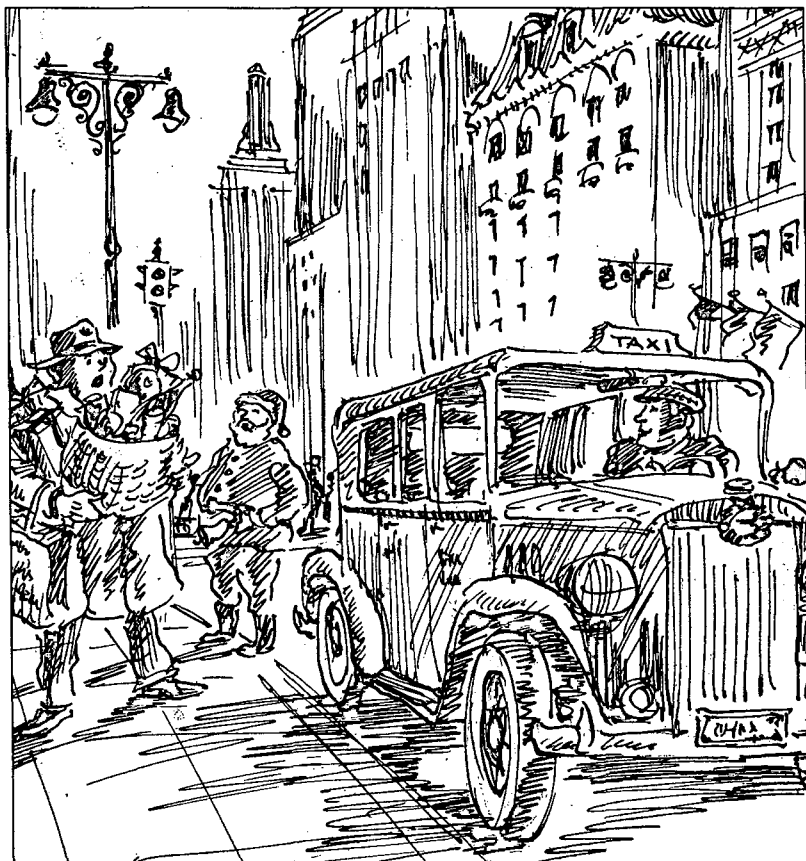


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/99

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C oming down in the elevator, Clement Teagle noticed an unwonted cordiality in Steve, the elevator boy, and Harry, the doorman, but thought nothing of it until he stopped at the bank on the corner to cash a check and noticed the date.

December the twenty-fourth.

Good gosh, Mr. Teagle thought, I haven't bought a present for Essie yet. Then he remembered Steve and Harry.

His eye caught a legend on a Christmas placard on the wall. "It is more blessed to give than to receive," said the placard.

"Oh yeah?" remarked Mr. Teagle, who, alas, was somewhat of a cynic.

Grumbling, he tore up the check he had started to write, and made out another, for a larger amount.

"Will you please give me new bills?" he asked.

"Indeed I shall," said Mr. Freyer, the teller, cordially.

He counted out one hundred dollars in new bills—crisp new bills—and passed them over to Mr. Teagle.

Then he tore up the check and handed the fragments to Mr. Teagle.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Teagle," said Mr. Freyer. "The bank of the Manhattan Company wants you to accept that one hundred dollars as a slight token of its esteem, with its best wishes for a merry Christmas. You have been a loyal depositor here these many years. You have overdrawn fewer times than most of your fellow depositors. You never argue about your monthly statements. You never feel insulted when a new teller identifies your signature before cashing your check. You are the kind of depositor who makes banking a joy, and I want to take this opportunity to tell you that we fellows around here, although we are not very demonstrative about that sort of thing, love you very much. A merry Christmas to you."

"You mean the bank is *giving* me this money?" said Mr. Teagle.

"That is the impression I was trying to convey," said Mr. Freyer, with a chuckle.

"Why—uh, thanks, Mr. Freyer. And—and thank the bank. This is—um—quite a surprise."

"Say no more about it, Mr. Teagle. And every Christmas joy to you, sir."

When Mr. Teagle left the bank he was somewhat perturbed, and a little stunned. He went back to the apartment to place the crisp new bills in envelopes for the boys, and as he left the elevator at his floor, Steve handed him an envelope. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Teagle," said Steve.

"Thanks, Steve," said Mr. Teagle. "I'll—I'll be wishing you one a little later," he added significantly.

"You don't need to, Mr. Teagle," said Steve. "A man like you wishes the whole world a merry Christmas every day, just by living."

"Oh, Steve, damn nice of you to say that, but I'm sure it's not deserved," said Mr. Teagle, modestly struggling with a feeling that Steve spoke no more than the simple truth.

"Well, I guess we won't argue about *that*," said Steve, gazing affectionately at Mr. Teagle.

I really believe that lad meant it, thought Mr. Teagle as he let himself into the apartment. I really believe he did.

Mr. Teagle opened the envelope Steve had handed him. A crisp new five dollar bill fell out.

Downstairs in the lobby, a few minutes later, Steve was protesting.

"I tell you it wasn't a mistake, Mr. Teagle. I put the bill in there on purpose. For you."

"Steve, I couldn't take—"

"But you *can* take it, and you *will*, Mr. Teagle. And a very merry Christmas to you."

"Then you accept this, Steve, and a merry Christmas to you."

"Oh no, Mr. Teagle. Not this year. You have been pretty swell to we fellows all the years you've lived here. Now it's our turn."

"You bet it is," said Harry the doorman, joining them and pressing a crisp new ten dollar bill into Mr. Teagle's hand. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Teagle. Buy yourself something foolish with this. I only wish it could be more, but I've had rather a bad year in the market."

"I think the boys on the night shift have a little surprise for Mr. Teagle, too," said Steve, with a twinkle in his eye.

Just then the superintendent came up.

"Well, well, well," he said jovially. "Who have we got here? Mr. Teagle, it may interest you to hear that I've been having a little chat about you with a certain old gentleman with a long, snowy beard and twinkling little eyes. Know who I mean?"

"Santa Claus?" Mr. Teagle asked.

"None other. And guess what! He asked me if you had been a good boy this year, and I was delighted to be able to tell him you had been, that you hadn't complained about the heat, hadn't run your radio after eleven at night, and hadn't had any late parties. Well, sir, you should have seen old Santa's face. He was tickled to hear it. Said he always knew you were a good boy. And what do you suppose he did?"

"What?" asked Mr. Teagle.

"He asked me to give you this and to tell you to buy yourself something for Christmas with it. Something foolish."

The super pressed a crisp new twenty dollar bill upon Mr. Teagle.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Teagle," said the super.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Teagle," said Steve the elevator boy.

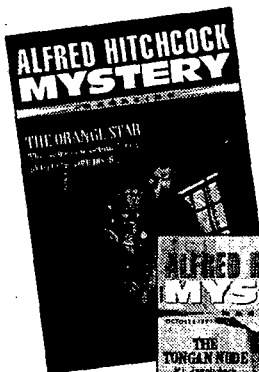
"Merry Christmas, Mr. Teagle," said Harry the doorman.

"Merry Christmas," said Mr. Teagle, in a voice you could scarcely

# MYSTERY VALUE PACK

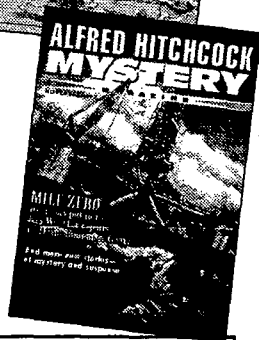
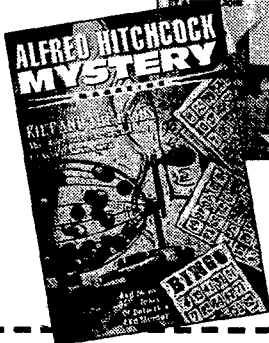
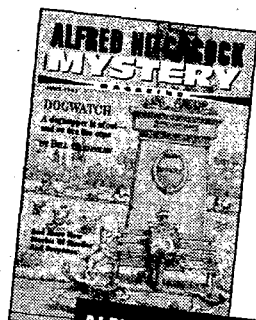
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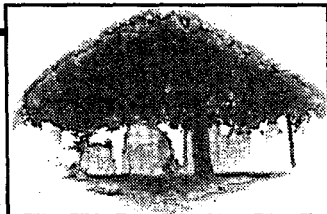
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# THE STORY THAT WON

The July/August Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Daniel LeBoeuf of Springfield, Virginia. Honorable mentions go to Marcia Saffreed of Norwalk, Ohio; Jan Streilein of Aiken, South Carolina; Marcia A. Erickson-



Snyder of Duncansville, Pennsylvania; Edna Van Leuven of Carson City, Nevada; Paul Mo of Tujunga, California; David Gott of Beaverton, Oregon; C. L. Bergan of El Cajon, California; and Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia.

Photo by Rolan Fajardo

## LOOKING THROUGH ANOTHER'S EYES by Daniel LeBoeuf

"See, Uncle Ralph? There, right through the mist? That's what I'm talking about! See that tree?"

"I see a tree, young man, but I see nothing amiss about it."

"But you must. Look at it! The trunk's all over there, and the leaves are all over here, and nothing about it looks right. Everything's been doing this lately. Don't you see it?"

"Matthew, I think I see everything I need to see. Now, let's see if I see what you see. You claim that yon tree is not quite right, that its parts are separated, like in an abstract painting, correct?"

"Yes."

"And that such apparitions have been appearing to you for two weeks now?"

"Yes."

"Aha. This corresponds roughly to the amount of time I've been smelling a sweetish smoky scent wafting from behind my garden shed. Tell me, young Matthew, is this your first time smoking marijuana cigarettes?"

"Me??? Uncle Ralph, I would never do that."

"And if I plucked that cigarette I see in your breast pocket, would I find tobacco in it?"

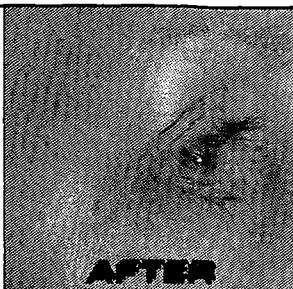
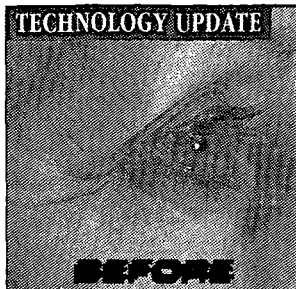
"Well, uhh . . ."

"Aha. Well, Matthew, you should read the papers more often. The marijuana in this area lately was laced accidentally with PCP."

"No sh(oo)t!"

"So, young Matthew, I guess it's fair to say that everything you've seen lately has been a bit dust jointed."

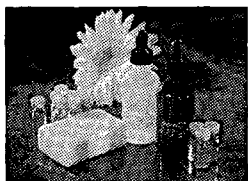
## TECHNOLOGY UPDATE



# European skin-care secret takes off ten years in just ten minutes

*TheraCél's™ four-step program locks in moisture to freshen and tighten skin right before your eyes.*

by Erica Williams



**As you age, moisture becomes locked into the skin, causing individual cells to shrink. The Advanced Procellular Formula hydrates the skin, actually pumping it up. Fine lines and wrinkles virtually disappear.**

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While no skin-care product can stop the aging process, scientific research into skin care has made some incredible advances. Now there is an extraordinary new four-step program that provides instant results right before your eyes. TheraCél is like

rather than one with an oily base. Finally, you apply the Night Serum before you go to bed. It will cause blushing for 10 to 15 minutes, as it cleanses deeply and tightens the skin. You will actually be able to feel it working.

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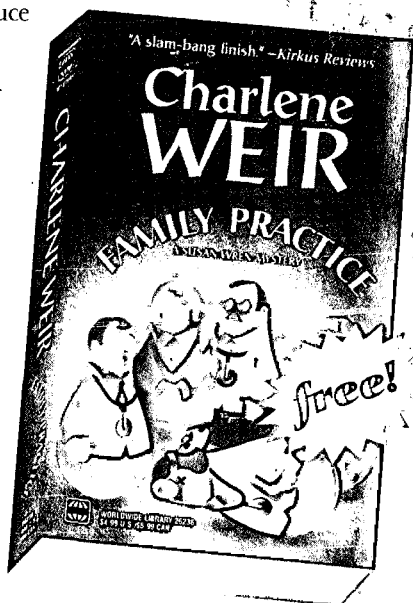
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